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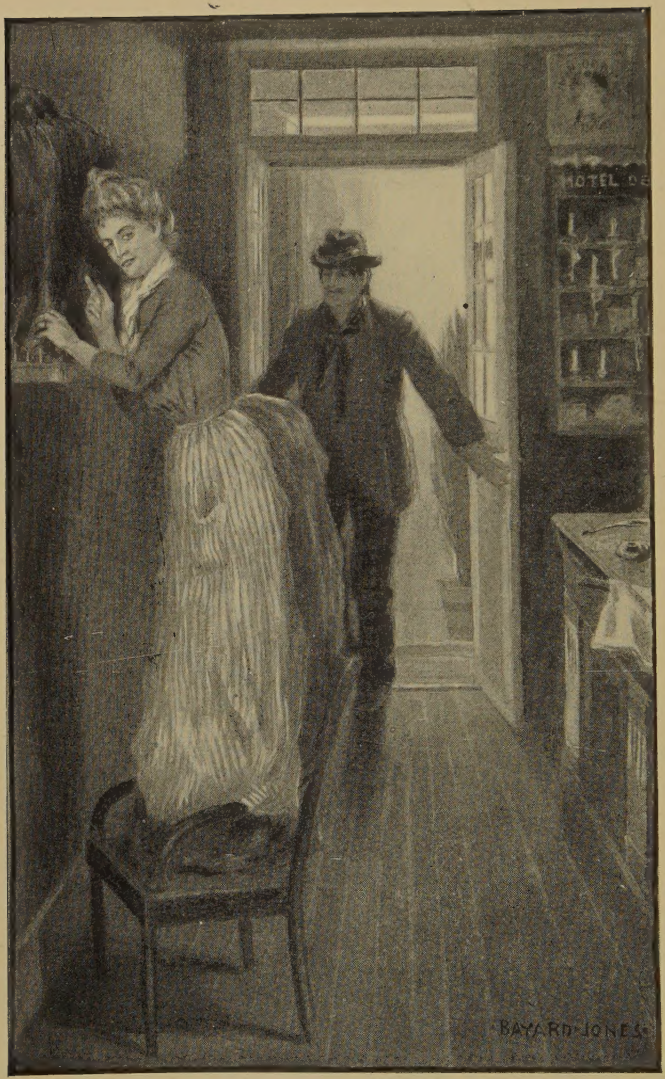
MONSIEUR LECOQ



Lecoq pushed open the glass doors . . . and entered the office.—Page 193.

MONSIEUR LECOQ

Translated from the French of

EMILE GABORIAU, 1832-1873.

Illustrated by

BAYARD JONES

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Lecoq pushed open the glass doors . . . and entered the office. . . . . *Frontispiece*

Facing page

Opposite them . . . stood a young man, a heavy oaken table forming a rampart before him. 8

"Can you not see, Monsieur, that you are torturing me frightfully, pitilessly?" 182

There was evident suspicion in the glance he cast around him. 314

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MONSIEUR LECOQ

CHAPTER I

On February 20, 18—, a Sunday that chanced to be Shrove Sunday, about eleven o'clock in the evening, a party of agents of the safety-service left the police-station at the old Barrière d'Italie.

The mission of this party was to explore that vast precinct which extends from the road to Fontainebleau to the Seine, and from the outer boulevards to the fortifications.

This quarter of the city had at that time anything but an enviable reputation. To venture there at night was considered so dangerous that soldiers from the forts, who came to Paris with permission to attend the theatre, were ordered to wait at the *barrière,* and not to pass through the perilous locality except in parties of three or four.

After midnight, these gloomy and narrow streets became the haunt of flocks of homeless vagabonds. Escaped criminals and malefactors made this quarter their rendezvous. If the day had been a lucky one, they made merry over their spoils. When sleep overtook them, they hid in doorways or among the rubbish in deserted houses.

Every effort had been made to dislodge these dan-

gerous guests, but the most energetic measures had failed of success.

Watched, hunted, and in imminent danger of arrest though they were, they always returned with idiotic obstinacy, obeying, as one might suppose, some mysterious law of attraction.

Hence, the police had there an immense trap, constantly baited, to which their game came of their own accord to be caught.

The result of a tour of inspection was so certain, that it was with an assured tone the officer in charge of the post called to the squad as they departed:

"I will prepare lodgings for our guests. Good luck to you, and much pleasure!"

This last wish was pure irony, for the weather was the most disagreeable that could be imagined.

A very heavy snow-storm had prevailed for several days. It was now beginning to thaw, and on all the frequented thoroughfares the slush was ankle-deep. It was still cold, however; a damp chill filled the air, and penetrated to the very marrow of one's bones. Besides, there was a dense fog, so dense that one could not see one's hands before one's face.

"What a beastly job!" growled one of the agents.

"Yes," replied the inspector who commanded the squad; "I think if you had an income of thirty thousand francs you would not be here."

The laugh that greeted this commonplace joke was not so much flattery as homage to a recognized and established superiority.

The inspector was, in fact, one of the most esteemed members of the force, a man who had proved his worth.

His powers of penetration were not, perhaps, very

great; but he thoroughly understood his business, its resources, its labyrinths, and its artifices. Long practice had given him imperturbable coolness, a great confidence in himself, and a sort of coarse diplomacy, that answered in place of shrewdness.

To his failings and to his virtues he added incontestable courage.

He laid his hand upon the collar of the most dangerous malefactor as tranquilly as a devotee dips his fingers in a basin of holy water.

He was a man about forty-six years of age, strongly built, with rugged features, a heavy mustache, and rather small, gray eyes, hidden by bushy eyebrows.

His name was Gevrol, but he was universally known as "General."

This sobriquet was pleasing to his vanity, which was not slight, as his subordinates well knew; and, doubtless, he felt that he ought to receive from them the consideration due a person of that exalted rank.

"If you begin to complain already," he added, gruffly, "what will you do by and by?"

In fact, it was too soon to complain.

The little party were then passing up the Rue de Choisy. The people upon the sidewalks were orderly; and the lights of the wine-shops illuminated the street.

For all these places were open. There is no fog nor thaw that is potent enough to dismay lovers of pleasure. And a boisterous crowd of maskers filled each saloon and public ball-room.

Through the open windows came, alternately, the sounds of loud voices and bursts of noisy music. Occasionally a drunken man staggered along the pavement, or a masked figure crept along in the shadow of the houses.

Before certain establishments Gevrol commanded a halt. He gave a peculiar whistle and almost immediately a man came out. It was another member of the force. His report was listened to, and then the squad passed on.

"To the left, boys!" ordered Gevrol; "we will take the Rue d'Ivry, and then cut through the shortest way to the Rue de Chevaleret."

From this point the expedition became really disagreeable.

Their way led through an unfinished street that had not even been named, full of mud-puddles and deep-holes, and obstructed with all sorts of rubbish.

There were no longer any lights or drinking saloons; no footsteps, no voices; nothing but solitude, gloom and silence.

One might have supposed one's self a hundred leagues from Paris, had it not been for the deep and continuous murmur that always arises from a large city, like the hollow roaring of a torrent in the depths of a cave.

All the men had turned up their pantaloons, and were advancing slowly, picking their way as carefully as an Indian when he is stealing upon his prey.

They had just passed the Rue de Château des-Rentier, when suddenly a wild shriek rent the air.

At this place, and at this hour, this cry was so frightfully significant, that all the men paused as if by common impulse.

"Did you hear that, General?" asked one of the police, in a low voice.

"Yes, there is murder going on not far from here—but where? Silence! let us listen."

They all stood motionless, with anxious ears, hold-

ing their breath, and soon a second cry, or rather a wild howl, resounded.

"Ah!" exclaimed the captain of the guard, "it is at the Poivrière." *

This peculiar appellation described exactly the place which it designated, and the guests that were wont to frequent it.

In figurative language that has its source in Mount Parnassus, they say that a man is "peppered" when he leaves his good sense in the bottom of his glass; hence the sobriquet of "stealers of pepper" given to the rascals whose specialty is to plunder inoffensive and helpless drunken men.

"What!" added Gevrol, "you do not know Mother Chupin's drinking saloon there, on the right. Run."

And setting the example, he dashed off in the direction indicated. His men followed, and in less than a minute they reached a hovel, sinister of aspect and standing alone.

It was indeed from this house that the cries had proceeded. They were repeated, and were immediately followed by two pistol shots.

The house was hermetically closed, but through the heart-shaped windows covered with shutters, filtered a reddish light like that of a fire.

One of the policemen darted to one of these windows, and raising himself up by clinging to the shutters with his hands, he endeavored to peer through the cracks, and to see what was passing within.

Gevrol himself ran to the door. "Open!" he commanded, striking it heavily.

No response.

But they could hear plainly the sound of a terrible

* Pepper-box.

struggle—of fierce imprecations, hollow groans, and occasionally the sobs of a woman.

"Horrible!" cried the policeman, who was peering through the shutters; "it is horrible!"

This exclamation decided Gevrol.

"Open, in the name of the law!" he cried, a third time.

And no person responding, with a blow of his shoulder that was as violent as a blow from a battering-ram, he dashed open the door.

Then the horror-stricken accent of the man who had been peering through the shutters was explained.

The room presented such a spectacle that all the agents, and even Gevrol himself, remained for a moment rooted to their places, cold with unspeakable horror.

Everything about the place denoted that it had been the scene of a terrible struggle, one of those savage conflicts that too often stain the drinking saloons of the *barrières* with blood.

The lights had been extinguished at the beginning of the strife, but a huge fire of pine logs illuminated the remotest corners of the room.

Tables, glasses, decanters, household utensils, and stools had been overturned, thrown in every direction, trodden upon and shivered into fragments.

Near the fireplace two men were stretched upon the floor. They were lying motionless upon their backs, their arms crossed. A third was lying in the middle of the room.

A woman crouched upon the lower steps of a staircase leading up to the floor above. She had thrown her apron over her head, and was uttering inarticulate moans.

Opposite them, on the threshold of a wide-open door leading into an adjoining room, stood a young man, a heavy oaken table forming a rampart before him.

He was of medium stature, and wore a full beard.

His clothing, which was like that worn by porters about the wharves and railway stations, was torn to fragments, and soiled with dust and wine and blood.

This certainly was the murderer. The expression of his face was terrible. A mad fury blazed in his eyes, and a convulsive sneer distorted his features. In his neck and on his cheek were two wounds that were bleeding profusely.

In his right hand, covered with a handkerchief, he held a pistol, which he aimed at the intruders.

"Surrender!" cried Gevrol.

The man's lips moved, but in spite of a visible effort he could not articulate a syllable.

"Don't do any mischief," continued the inspector, "we are in force, you cannot escape; so lay down your arms."

"I am innocent," exclaimed the man, in a hoarse, strained voice.

"Naturally, but we do not see it."

"I have been attacked; ask that old woman. I defended myself; I have killed—I had a right to do so; it was in self-defence!"

The gesture with which he enforced these words was so menacing that one of the policemen drew Gevrol violently to one side, saying, as he did so:

"Take care, General, take care! The revolver has five barrels, and we have heard but two shots."

But the inspector was inaccessible to fear; he freed himself from the grasp of his subordinate and again stepped forward speaking in a still calmer tone.

"No foolishness, my boy; if your case is a good one, which is possible after all, do not spoil it."

A frightful indecision betrayed itself on the young man's features. He held Gevrol's life at the end of his finger; was he about to press the trigger?

No, he suddenly threw his weapon to the floor, saying:

"Come and take me!"

And turning, he darted into the adjoining room, hoping doubtless to escape by some place of egress known to himself.

Gevrol had expected this movement. He sprang after him with outstretched arms, but the table retarded him.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "the wretch escapes us!"

But the fate of the fugitive was already decided.

While Gevrol was parleying, one of the policemen—the one who had peered through the window—had made a circuit of the house and had effected an entrance through the back door.

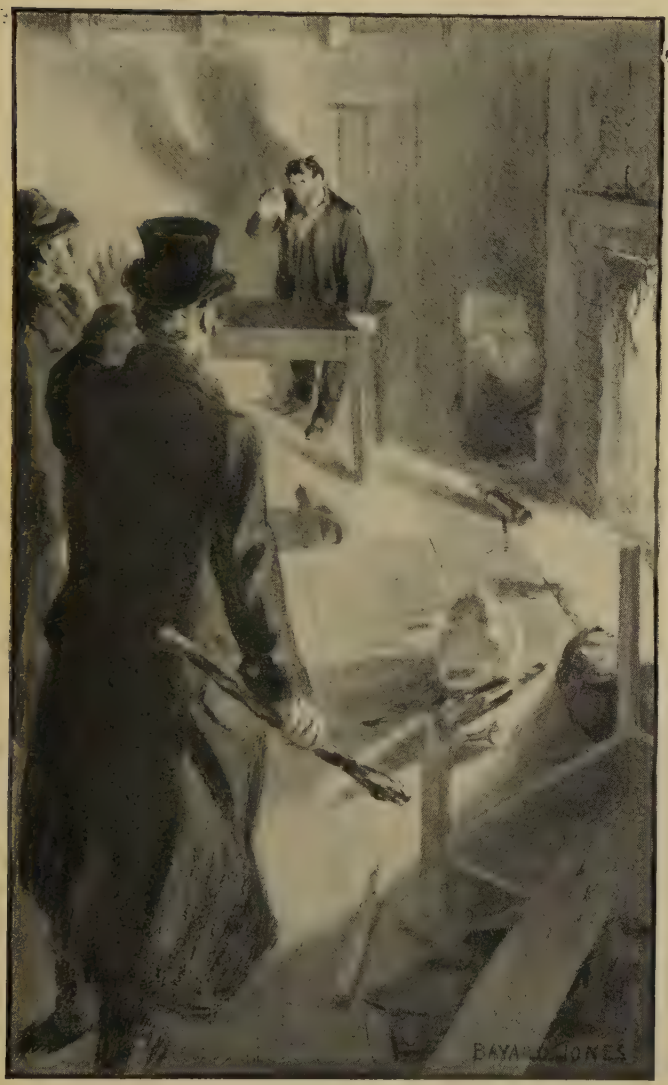
As the murderer was darting out, this man sprang upon him, seized him, and with surprising strength and agility dragged him back.

The murderer tried to resist; in vain. He had lost his strength: he tottered and fell upon the table that had protected him, murmuring, loud enough for everyone to hear:

"Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

This simple and decisive manœuvre on the part of the subordinate had won the victory, and must have delighted the inspector.

"Good, my boy," said he, "very good! Ah! you have a talent for your business, and you will do well if ever an opportunity——"



Opposite them . . . stood a young man, a heavy oaken table forming a rampart before him.

He checked himself; all his followers so evidently shared his enthusiasm that a feeling of jealousy overtook him. He felt his prestige diminishing, and hastened to add:

"The idea had occurred to me; but I could not give the order without warning the scoundrel himself."

This remark was superfluous. All the men had gathered around the murderer. They surrounded him, and, after binding his feet and hands, they fastened him securely to a chair.

He offered no resistance. His wild excitement had given place to that gloomy prostration that follows all unnatural efforts, either of mind or of body. Evidently he had abandoned himself to his fate.

When Gevrol saw that the men had finished this task:

"Now," he commanded, "let us attend to the others; and light the lamps, for the fire is going out."

It was with the two men stretched out before the hearth that the inspector began his examination.

He questioned the beating of their hearts; their hearts no longer beat. He held the crystal of his watch close to their lips; the glass remained shining and clear.

"Useless," he murmured, after several trials, "useless; they are dead! They will never see morning again. Leave them in the same position until the arrival of the coroner, and let us look at the third."

The third man still breathed. He was a young man, wearing the uniform of a common soldier. He was unarmed, and his large gray cloak was partly open, revealing his bare chest.

They lifted him very carefully, for he groaned piteously at the slightest movement, and they placed him

in an upright position, with his back supported against the wall.

Soon he opened his eyes, and in a faint voice asked for something to drink.

They brought him a glass of water; he drank it with evident satisfaction; then he drew a long breath, and seemed to be regaining some of his strength.

"Where are you wounded?" demanded Gevrol.

"In the head, there," he responded, trying to raise one of his arms. "Oh! how I suffer."

The police agent, who had cut off the retreat of the murderer, approached, and with a dexterity that an old surgeon might have envied, made an examination of the gaping wound that the young man had received in the back of his neck.

"It is nothing," the policeman declared.

But there was no mistaking the movement of his lower lip. It was evident that he considered the wound very dangerous, probably mortal.

"It will be nothing," affirmed Gevrol; "wounds in the head, when they do not kill at once, are cured in a month."

The wounded man smiled sadly.

"I have received my death-blow," he murmured.

"Nonsense!"

"Oh! it is useless to say anything; I feel it, but I do not complain. I have received only my just deserts."

All the agents of police turned toward the murderer on hearing these words. They supposed that he would take advantage of this opportunity to repeat his protestations of innocence.

Their expectations were disappointed; he did not speak, although he must certainly have heard the words.

"It was the brigand, Lacheneur, who enticed me here," continued the wounded man, in a voice that was growing fainter.

"Lacheneur?"

"Yes, Jean Lacheneur, a former actor, who had known me when I was rich—for I have had a fortune, but I have spent it all; I wished to amuse myself. He, knowing I was without a *sou*, came to me and promised me money enough to begin life over again. And because I believed him I came to die like a dog in this hole! Oh! I will have my revenge on him!"

At the thought he clinched his hands threateningly.

"I will have my revenge," he resumed.

"I know much more than he believes. I will tell all."

He had presumed too much upon his strength. Anger had given him a moment's energy, but it was at the cost of the life that was ebbing away.

When he again tried to speak, he could not. Twice he opened his lips, but there issued from them only a choking cry of impotent rage.

It was the last manifestation of intelligence. A bloody foam gathered upon his lips, his eyes rolled back in their sockets, his body stiffened, and he fell face downward in a terrible convulsion.

"It is over," murmured Gevrol.

"Not yet," replied the young policeman, who had shown himself so efficient; "but he cannot live more than two minutes. Poor devil! he will say nothing."

The inspector of police had risen from the floor as if he had just witnessed the commonest incident in the world, and was carefully dusting the knees of his pantaloons.

"Oh, well," he responded, "we shall know all we

need to know. This fellow is a soldier, and the number of his regiment will be given on the buttons of his cloak."

A slight smile curved the lips of his subordinate.

"I think you are mistaken, General," said he.

"How——"

"Yes, I understand. Seeing him attired in a military coat, you have supposed— But no; this poor wretch was no soldier. Do you wish an immediate proof of this? Is his hair the regulation cut? Where have you seen soldiers with their hair falling upon their shoulders?"

This objection silenced the general for a moment; but he replied, brusquely:

"Do you think that I keep my eyes in my pocket? What you have remarked did not escape my notice; only I said to myself, here is a young man who has profited by leave of absence to visit the wig-maker."

"At least——"

But Gevrol would permit no more interruptions.

"Enough talk," he declared. "We will now hear what has passed. Mother Chupin, the old hussy, is not dead!"

As he spoke, he advanced toward the old woman, who was still crouching upon the stairs. She had not spoken, nor moved, nor ventured so much as a look, since the entrance of the police, but her moans had not been discontinued.

With a sudden movement, Gevrol tore off the apron which she had thrown over her head, and there she stood, such as years, vice, poverty, and torrents of brandy and *ratafea* had made her; wrinkled, shrivelled, toothless and haggard, her skin, yellow and dry as parchment, drawn tightly over her bones.

"Come, stand up!" ordered the inspector. "Your lamentations do not trouble me much. You ought to be sent to prison for putting such vile drugs into your liquors, to breed madness in the brains of your visitors."

The old woman's little red eyes travelled slowly around the room, and in tearful tones she exclaimed:

"What a misfortune! what will become of me? Everything is broken—I am ruined!"

She seemed to be impressed only by the loss of her table utensils.

"Now tell us how this trouble began," said Gevrol.

"Alas! I know nothing about it. I was upstairs mending my son's clothes, when I heard a dispute."

"And after that?"

"Of course I came down, and I saw those three men that are lying there picking a quarrel with that young man whom you have arrested; the poor innocent! For he is innocent, as truly as I am an honest woman. If my son Poylte had been here he would have parted them; but I, a poor widow, what could I do? I cried 'Police!' with all my might."

After giving this testimony she resumed her seat, thinking she had said enough. But Gevrol rudely ordered her to stand up again.

"Oh! we have not done," said he. "I wish other particulars."

"What particulars, dear Monsieur Gevrol, since I saw nothing?"

Anger crimsoned the large ears of the inspector.

"What would you say, old woman, if I arrested you?"

"It would be a great injustice."

"It is what will happen if you persist in remaining

silent. I have an idea that a fortnight in Saint-Lazare would untie your tongue."

This name produced the effect of an electric shock on the Widow Chupin. She suddenly ceased her hypocritical lamentations, rose, placed her hands defiantly upon her hips, and poured forth a torrent of invective upon Gevrol and his agents, accusing them of persecuting her family since they had previously arrested her son, a *mauvais sujee*, and swearing that she was not afraid of prison, and would be only too glad to end her days there beyond the reach of want.

At first the general tried to impose silence upon the terrible termagant; but he soon discovered that he was powerless; besides, all his subordinates were laughing. He turned his back upon her, and advancing toward the murderer, he said:

"You, at least, will not refuse an explanation."

The man hesitated for a moment.

"I have already said all that I have to say," he replied, at last. "I have told you that I am innocent; and a man on the point of death who was struck down by my hand, and this old woman, have both confirmed my declaration. What more do you desire? When the judge questions me, I will, perhaps, reply; until then do not expect another word from me."

It was easy to see that this man's resolution was irrevocable; and that he was not to be daunted by any sergeant of police.

Very often criminals, from the moment of their capture, preserve an absolute silence. These men are experienced and shrewd; these are the men who cause lawyers and judges many sleepless nights.

They have learned that a system of defence cannot be improvised at once; that it is, on the contrary, a work

of patience and of meditation; and knowing what a terrible effect an apparently insignificant response drawn from them at the moment of detection may produce on a court of justice, they are silent.

Gevrol was about to insist, when someone announced that the soldier had just breathed his last.

"As that is so, my boys," he remarked, "two of you will remain here, and I will leave with the others. I shall go and arouse the commissioner of police, and inform him of the affair; he will take the matter in hand; and we will do whatever he commands. My responsibility will be over, in any case. So untie the legs of our prisoner, and bind Mother Chupin's hands, and we will drop them both at the station-house as we pass."

The men hastened to obey, with the exception of the youngest among them, the same who had won the eulogiums of the general.

He approached his chief, and motioning that he desired to speak with him, drew him outside the door.

When they were a few steps from the house:

"What do you wish?" inquired Gevrol.

"I want to know, General, what you think of this affair."

"I think, my boy, that four scoundrels encountered each other in this vile den. They began to quarrel; and from words they came to blows. One of them had a revolver, and he killed the others. It is as clear as daylight. According to his antecedents, and according to the antecedents of the victims, the assassin will be judged. Perhaps society owes him some thanks."

"And you think that any investigation—any further search is unnecessary?"

"Entirely unnecessary."

The younger man appeared to deliberate for a moment.

"It seems to me, General," he replied at length, "that this affair is not perfectly clear. Have you noticed the murderer, remarked his demeanor, and observed his look? Have you been surprised as I have been——"

"By what?"

"Ah, well! it seems to me—I may, of course, be mistaken—but I fancy that appearances are deceitful, and—— Yes, I suspect something."

"Bah! Explain why you should, if you please."

"How can you explain the power of scenting his prey possessed by a hunting dog?"

Gevrol shrugged his shoulders.

"In short," he replied, "you scent a melodrama here—a rendezvous of great gentlemen in disguise, here at the Poivrière—at the house of Mother Chupin! Well, hunt the mystery, my boy; search all you like; you have my permission."

"What! you will allow me?"

"I not only allow you, I order you to do it. You are going to remain here with such a one of your comrades as you may select. And if you find anything that I have not seen, I will allow you to buy me a pair of spectacles."

CHAPTER II

The young man to whom Gevrol abandoned what he thought an unnecessary investigation was a debutant in his profession.

His name was Lecoq.

He was a man of twenty-five or twenty-six years of

age, almost beardless, very pale, with red lips, and an abundance of wavy black hair. He was rather small, but well proportioned; and his every movement betrayed unusual energy.

There was nothing remarkable about his appearance, if we except his eyes, which sparkled brilliantly or grew dull, according to his mood; and his nose, whose large and rather full nostrils had a surprising mobility.

The son of a rich and respectable family in Normandy, Lecoq had received a good and solid education.

He had begun his law studies in Paris, when in the same week, blow following blow, he learned that his father had died, financially ruined, and that his mother had survived him only a few hours.

He was now alone in the world, destitute of resources —and he was obliged to live. He had an opportunity of learning his true value; it was nothing.

The university, on bestowing the diploma of bachelor, does not give an annuity with it. And of what use is a college education to a poor orphan boy?

He envied the lot of those who, with a trade at the ends of their fingers, could boldly enter the office of any manufacturer, and say: "I would like work."

Such men were working and eating.

He sought bread by all the methods employed by people who are in reduced circumstances! Fruitless labor! There are one hundred thousand people in Paris who have seen better days.

No matter! He gave proofs of undaunted energy. He gave lessons, and he copied documents for a lawyer. He made his *début* in a new *rôle* almost every day, and left no means untried to earn an honest livelihood.

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At last he obtained employment from a well-known astronomer, the Baron Moser, and spent his days in solving bewildering and intricate problems at the rate of one hundred francs a month.

But a season of discouragement came. After five years of constant toil, he found himself at the same point from which he had started. He was nearly crazed with rage and disappointment when he recapitulated his blighted hopes, his fruitless efforts, and the insults he had endured.

The past had been sad, the present was intolerable, the future threatened to be terrible.

Condemned to constant privations, he tried to escape from the horrors of his real life by taking refuge in dreams.

Alone in his garret, after a day of unremitting toil, assailed by the thousand longings of youth, he endeavored to devise some means of suddenly making himself rich.

All reasonable methods being beyond his reach, it was not long before he was engaged in devising the worst expedients.

In short, this moral and honest young man spent much of his time in perpetrating—in fancy—the most abominable crimes. Sometimes he himself was frightened by the work of his imagination. An hour of recklessness was all that was necessary to make him pass from the idea to the fact, from theory to practice.

This is the case with all monomaniacs; an hour comes in which the strange conceptions that have filled their brains can be no longer held in check.

One day he could not help exposing to his patron a little plan which he had conceived, which would enable him to obtain five or six hundred francs from London.

Two letters and a telegram were all that was necessary, and the game was won. It was impossible to fail, and there was no danger of arousing suspicion.

The astronomer, amazed at the simplicity of the plan, could but admire it. On reflection, however, he concluded that it would not be prudent for him to retain so ingenious a secretary in his service.

This was why, on the following day, he gave him a month's pay in advance, and dismissed him, saying:

"When one has your disposition, and is poor, one will either become a famous thief or a great detective. Choose."

Lecoq retired in confusion; but the astronomer's words bore fruit in his mind.

"Why should I not follow good advice?" he asked himself.

Police service did not inspire him with repugnance—far from it. He had often admired that mysterious power whose hand was everywhere, which one could not see nor hear, but which heard and saw everything.

He was delighted with the prospect of being the instrument of this power. He considered such a profession as a useful and honorable employment of the special talent with which he had been endowed, and which promised a life of excitement, of thrilling adventures, and fame at last.

In short, this profession held a wonderful charm for him.

So much so, that on the following week, thanks to a letter from Baron Moser, he was admitted into the service.

A cruel disenchantment awaited him. He had seen the results, but not the means. His surprise was like that of a simple-minded frequenter of the theatre, when

he is admitted for the first time behind the scenes, and sees the decorations and tinsel that are so dazzling at a distance.

Ah, well! the opportunity for which he had so ardently longed, for which he had been waiting for months, had come at last, he thought, on entering the Poivrière.

While he was clinging to the window he saw by the light of his ambition the pathway to success.

It was at first only a presentiment. It soon became a supposition, then a conviction based upon actual facts, which had escaped the notice of his companions, but which he had observed and carefully noted.

Fortune had, at last, turned in his favor; he recognized this fact when he saw Gevrol neglect all but the merest formalities of examination, when he heard him declare peremptorily that this triple murder was merely the result of one of those ferocious quarrels so frequent among vagrants on the outskirts of the city.

"Ah, well!" he thought; "have it your own way—trust in appearances, since you will see nothing beneath them! I will prove to you that my youthful theory is better than all your experience."

The carelessness of the inspector gave Lecoq a right to secretly seek information on his own account; but by warning his superior officer before attempting anything on his own responsibility, he protected himself against any accusation of ambition or of unduly taking advantage of his comrade. These would be grave accusations against him in a profession where competition and rivalry are most potent; and where wounded vanity has so many opportunities to avenge itself by all sorts of petty treason.

He spoke them to his superior officer—said just

enough to be able to say, in case of success: "Ah! I warned you!"—just enough *not* to dispel the doubt in Gevrol's mind.

The permission that he obtained was his first triumph, and the best possible augury; but he knew how to dissimulate, and it was in a tone of the utmost indifference that he requested one of his comrades to remain with him.

Then, while the others were making ready to depart, he seated himself upon a corner of the table, apparently oblivious of all that was passing. He did not dare to lift his head, for fear of betraying his joy, so much did he fear that his companions would read his hopes and his plans in his face.

Inwardly he was wild with impatience. Though the murderer submitted with good grace to the precautions that were taken to prevent his escape, it required some time to bind the hands of the Widow Chupin, who fought and howled as if they were burning her alive.

"They will never go!" Lecoq said to himself.

They did so at last, however. Gevrol gave the order to depart, and left the house, after addressing a laughing good-by to his subordinate.

The latter made no reply. He followed them to the threshold of the door, as if to assure himself that the squad had really gone.

He trembled at the thought that Gevrol might reflect, change his mind, and return to solve the mystery, as was his right.

His anxiety was needless. The forms of the men faded in the distance, the cries of Widow Chupin died away in the stillness of the night. They had all disappeared.

Not until then did Lecoq re-enter the room. He could no longer conceal his delight; his eyes sparkled like a conqueror taking possession of an empire; he stamped his foot upon the floor and exclaimed:

"Now it belongs to us two!"

CHAPTER III

Authorized by Gevrol to choose one of his comrades to remain with him in Poivrière, Lecoq had requested the one who was considered the least intelligent of the party to keep him company.

He was not influenced by a fear of being obliged to share the fruits of success with his companion, but by the necessity of having an assistant of whom he could, in case of need, exact obedience. The comrade Lecoq selected was a man of about fifty, who, after a term in the cavalry service, had entered the *prefecture*.

In the humble office that he occupied he had seen *prefet* succeed *prefet*, and had probably filled a prison with culprits whom he had arrested with his own hands.

He was no more shrewd and no more zealous now than he had always been. When he received an order he executed it with military exactitude, so far as he understood it.

If he had failed to understand it, so much the worse.

He discharged his duties like a blind man, like an old horse trained for a riding-school.

When he had a moment's leisure, and any money, he got drunk.

He spent his life between two fits of intoxication, without ever rising above a condition of demi-lucidity.

His comrades had known, but had forgotten his name. Everyone now called him Father Absinthe.

Naturally he did not observe the enthusiasm nor the tone of triumph in his young companion's voice.

"Upon my word," he remarked, when they were alone, "your idea of keeping me here was a good one, and I thank you for it. While the others will spend the night paddling about in the slush, I shall get a good sleep."

Here he stood, in a room that was splashed with blood, that was shuddering with crime, and face to face with the still warm bodies of the murdered men he could talk of sleep!

But what did all this matter to him? He had seen so many similar scenes in his life. And does not habit infallibly lead to professional indifference—that strange phenomenon that makes the soldier cool and composed in the midst of conflict, that gives the surgeon impassibility when the patient shrieks and writhes beneath his operating knife.

"I have been upstairs, looking about," pursued Father Absinthe; "I saw a bed up there, and we can mount guard here, by turns."

With an imperious gesture, Lecoq interrupted him.

"You must give up that idea, Father Absinthe; we are not here to sleep, but to collect information—to make the most careful researches, to note all the probabilities. In a few hours the commissioner of police, the physician and the coroner will be here. I wish to have a report ready for them."

This proposition seemed anything but pleasing to the old policeman.

"Eh! what is the use of that?" he exclaimed. "I know the general. When he goes in search of the commissioner, as he has this evening, there is nothing

more to be done. Do you think that you see anything that he did not see?"

"I think that Gevrol, like everyone else, is liable to be mistaken. I think that he believes too implicitly in what seems to him evidence. I could swear that this affair is not what it seems to be; and I am sure that we can, if we will, discover the mystery which is concealed by appearances."

Though the vehemence of the young officer was intense, he did not succeed in making any impression upon his companion, who, with a yawn that threatened to dislocate his jaws, replied:

"Perhaps you are right; but I am going to bed. This need not prevent you from searching around, however; and if you find anything you can wake me."

Lecoq made no sign of impatience; nor in reality was he impatient. It afforded him the opportunity for which he was longing.

"You will give me a moment first," he remarked. "In five minutes, by your watch, I will promise to let you put your finger on the mystery that I suspect here."

"Well, go on for five minutes."

"After that you shall be free, Father Absinthe. Only it is clear that if I work it out alone, I alone shall pocket the reward that a solution of the mystery will certainly bring."

At the word "reward" the old policeman pricked up his ears. He was dazzled by the vision of an infinite number of bottles of the greenish liquor whose name he bore.

"Convince me, then," said he, taking a seat upon a stool, which he had lifted from the floor.

Lecoq remained standing in front of him.

"To begin with," he remarked, "whom do you suppose the person we have just arrested to be?"

"A porter, probably, or a vagabond."

"That is to say, a man belonging to the lowest order of society; consequently, a man without education."

"Certainly."

Lecoq spoke with his eyes fixed upon the eyes of his companion. He distrusted his own powers, as is usual with persons of real merit, and he felt that if he could succeed in making his convictions penetrate the obtuse mind of his companion, it would prove the justice of these convictions.

"And now," he continued, "what would you say if I should prove to you that this young man had received an excellent, even refined education?"

"I should reply that it was very extraordinary. I should reply that—but what a fool I am! You have not proved it to me yet."

"But I can do so very easily. Do you remember the words that he uttered as he fell?"

"Yes, I remember them perfectly. He said: 'It is the Prussians who are coming.'"

"What do you suppose he meant by that?"

"What a question! I should suppose that he did not like Prussians, and that he supposed he was offering us a terrible insult."

Lecoq was waiting anxiously for this response.

"Ah, well! Father Absinthe," he said, gravely, "you are wrong, quite wrong. And that this man has an education superior to his apparent position is proved by the fact that you did not understand his meaning, nor his intention. It was this single phrase that made the case clear to me."

The physiognomy of Father Absinthe expressed the

strange and comical perplexity of a man who is so thoroughly mystified that he knows not whether to laugh or to be angry. After reflecting a little, he decided to be angry.

"You are rather too young to impose upon an old man like me," he remarked. "I do not like boasters——"

"One moment!" interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to explain. You have certainly heard of a terrible battle which resulted in one of the greatest defeats that ever happened to France—the battle of Waterloo?"

"I do not see the connection——"

"Answer, if you please."

"Yes—then!"

"Very well; you must know, then, papa, that for some time victory perched upon the banners of France. The English began to fall back, and already the emperor exclaimed: 'We have them!' when suddenly on the right a little in the rear, troops were seen advancing. It was the Prussian army. The battle of Waterloo was lost."

In all his life, worthy Father Absinthe had never made such strenuous efforts to understand anything. In this case they were not wholly useless, for he half rose in his chair, and with the tone in which Archimedes cried "I have found it!" he exclaimed:

"I understand. The man's words were only an allusion."

"It is as you have said," remarked Lecoq, approvingly. "But I had not finished. If the emperor was thrown into consternation by the appearance of the Prussians, it was because he was momentarily expecting the arrival of one of his own generals from the same direction—Grouchy—with thirty-five thousand men.

So if this man's allusion was exact and complete, he was not expecting an enemy, but a friend. Now draw your own conclusions."

Amazed, but convinced, his companion opened to their widest extent the eyes that had been heavy with sleep a few moments before.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he murmured, "if you put it in that way! But I forget; you must have seen something, as you were looking through the cracks of the shutter."

The young man shook his head.

"Upon my honor," he declared, "I saw nothing save the struggle between the murderer and the poor devil in the garb of a soldier. It was that sentence alone that aroused my attention."

"Wonderful! prodigious!" exclaimed the astonished old man.

"I will add that reflection has confirmed my suspicions. I asked myself why this man, instead of fleeing, should have waited and remained there, at that door, to parley with us."

With a bound, Father Absinthe was upon his feet.

"Why?" he interrupted; "because he had accomplices, and he wished to give them time to escape. Ah! I understand it all now."

A triumphant smile parted Lecoq's lips.

"That is what I said to myself," he replied; "and now it is easy to verify my suspicions. There is snow outside, is there not?"

It was not necessary to say any more. The elder officer seized the light, and followed by his companion, he hastened to the back door of the house, which opened into a small garden.

In this sheltered enclosure the snow had not melted,

and upon its white surface numerous footprints lay, like dark stains.

Without hesitation, Lecoq threw himself upon his knees in the snow, in order to examine them; he rose again almost immediately.

"These indentations were not made by the feet of men," said he. "There have been women here."

CHAPTER IV

Obstinate men of Father Absinthe's stamp, who are always inclined to differ with the opinions of others, are the very people who end in madly adopting them.

When an idea has at last penetrated their empty brains, they install it there magisterially, and dwell upon it, and develop it until it exceeds the bounds of reason.

Hence the veteran of the service was now much more strongly convinced than his companion, that the usually clever Gevrol was mistaken, and he laughed him to scorn.

On hearing Lecoq affirm that women had taken part in the horrible scene at the Poivrière, his joy was extreme.

"A fine affair!" he exclaimed; "an excellent case!"

And suddenly recollecting a maxim that has been handed down from the time of Cicero, he added, in sententious tones:

"Who holds the woman holds the cause!"

Lecoq did not deign to reply. He was standing upon the threshold, leaning against the casing of the door, his hand pressed to his forehead, as motionless as a statue.

The discovery which he had just made, and which so delighted Father Absinthe, filled him with conster-

nation. It was the death of his hopes, the annihilation of the ingenious structure which his imagination had built upon the foundation of a single sentence. There was no longer any mystery. No celebrity to be gained by a brilliant stroke!

For the presence of two women in this vile den explained everything in the most natural and commonplace fashion.

Their presence explained the quarrel, the testimony of Widow Chupin, the dying declaration of the pretended soldier.

The behavior of the murderer was also explained. He had remained to cover the retreat of the two women; he had sacrificed himself in order to save them, an act of that chivalrous gallantry so common in the French character, that even the scoundrels of the *barrières* were not entirely destitute of it.

But the strange allusion to the battle of Waterloo remained unexplained. But what did that prove now? Nothing, simply nothing. And who could say how low an unworthy passion might cause a man even of birth and breeding to descend? And the carnival afforded an opportunity for the parties to disguise themselves.

But while Lecoq was turning and twisting all these probabilities in his mind, Father Absinthe became impatient.

"Are we going to remain here until doomsday?" he asked. "Are we to pause just at the moment when our search has been productive of such brilliant results?"

"Brilliant results!" These words stung the young man's soul as deeply as the keenest irony could have done.

"Leave me alone," he replied, gruffly; "and, above all, do not walk about the garden. You will spoil the footprints."

His companion swore a little; then he, too, became silent. He submitted to the irresistible ascendancy of a superior will and intelligence.

Lecoq was engaged in following out his course of reasoning.

"These are probably the events as they occurred," he thought.

"The murderer, leaving the ball at the Rainbow, a public house not far from here, near the fortifications, came to this saloon, accompanied by two women. He found three men drinking here, who either began teasing him, or who displayed too much gallantry to his companions. He became angry. The others threatened him; he was one against three; he was armed; he became wild with rage and fired——"

He checked himself, and in an instant after he added, aloud:

"But was it the murderer who brought these women here? If he is tried, this will be the important point. It is necessary to obtain information on the subject."

He immediately went back into the house, closely followed by his colleague, and began an examination of the footprints about the door that Gevrol had forced open.

Labor lost. There was but little snow on the ground about the entrance of the hovel, and so many persons had passed in and out that Lecoq could discover nothing.

What a disappointment after his patient hopes!

Lecoq could have cried with rage. He saw the opportunity for which he had sighed so long indefinitely

postponed. He fancied he could hear Gevrol's coarse sarcasms.

"Enough of this," he murmured, under his breath. "The general was right, and I am a fool!"

He was so positively convinced that one could do no more than discover the circumstances of some commonplace, vulgar broil, that he began to wonder if it would not be wise to renounce his search and take a nap, while awaiting the coming of the commissioner of police.

But Father Absinthe was no longer of this opinion.

This worthy man, who was far from suspecting the reflections in which his companion was indulging, could not explain his inaction.

"Ah, well! my boy," said he, "have you lost your wits? This is losing time, it seems to me. The justice will arrive in a few hours, and what report shall we present? As for me, if you desire to go to sleep, I shall pursue my investigations alone."

Disappointed as he was, the young police officer could not repress a smile. He recognized his own exhortations of a few moments before. It was the old man who had suddenly become intrepid.

"To work, then!" he sighed, like a man who, while foreseeing defeat, wishes, at least, to have no cause to reproach himself.

He found it, however, extremely difficult to follow the footprints in the open air by the uncertain light of a candle, which was extinguished by the least breath of wind.

"It is impossible," said Lecoq; "I wonder if there is not a lantern in the house. If we could only lay our hands upon it!"

They searched everywhere, and, at last, upstairs in

the Widow Chupin's own apartment, they found a well-trimmed lantern, so small and close that it certainly had never been intended for honest purposes.

"A regular burglar's implement," said Father Absinthe, with a coarse laugh.

The implement was useful in any case; the two men were agreed upon that when they returned to the garden and recommenced their investigations systematically.

They advanced very slowly and with extreme caution. The old man carefully held the lantern in the best position, and Lecoq, on his knees, studied each footprint with the attention of a chiromancer striving to read the future in the hand of a rich client.

A new examination assured Lecoq that he had been correct in his first supposition. It was plain that two women had quitted the Poivrière by this door. They had departed running; this was proved by the length of the steps and also by the shape of the footprints.

The difference in the tracks left by the two fugitives was so remarkable, that it did not escape Father Absinthe's eyes.

"*Cristi!*" he muttered; "one of these jades can boast of having a pretty foot at the end of her leg!"

He was right. One of the tracks betrayed a small, coquettish and slender foot, clad in an elegant high-heeled boot with a narrow sole and an arched instep.

The other denoted a broad, short foot, that grew wider toward the end, and which was encased in a strong, low shoe.

This was indeed a clew. Lecoq's hopes revived; so eagerly does a man welcome any supposition that is in accordance with his desires.

Trembling with anxiety, he went to examine other

footprints a short distance from these; and an excited exclamation broke from his lips.

"What is it?" eagerly inquired the other agent; "what do you see?"

"Come and look for yourself, papa; see there."

The good man bent down, and his surprise was so great that he almost dropped the lantern.

"Oh!" said he, in a stifled voice, "a man's footprint!"

"Exactly. And this fellow wore the finest of boots. See that imprint, how clear, how neat it is!"

Worthy Father Absinthe was furiously scratching his ear, his usual method of quickening his rather slow wits.

"But it seems to me," he ventured at last, "that this individual was not coming *from* this ill-fated hovel."

"Of course not; the direction of the foot tells you that. No, he was not going from here, he was coming here. But he did not pass beyond the spot where we are now standing. He was advancing on tip-toe with outstretched neck and listening ears, when, on reaching this spot, he heard some noise; fear seized him, and he fled."

"Or, rather, the women were going out as he was coming, and——"

"No, the women were outside the garden when he entered it."

This assertion seemed far too audacious to suit Lecoq's companion, who remarked: "One cannot be sure of that."

"I am sure of it, however; and can prove it conclusively. You doubt it, papa? It is because your eyes are growing old. Bring your lantern a little nearer—yes, here it is—our man placed his large foot upon one

of the marks made by the woman with the small foot and has almost effaced it."

This unexceptionable bit of circumstantial evidence stupefied the old policeman.

"Now," continued Lecoq, "could this man have been the accomplice whom the murderer was expecting? Might it not have been some strolling vagrant whose attention was attracted by the two pistol shots? This is what we must ascertain. And we will ascertain it. Come!"

A wooden fence of lattice-work, a trifle more than three feet high, similar to that which prevents access to the railway trains, was all that separated the Widow Chupin's garden from the waste land that surrounded it.

When Lecoq made the circuit of the house to cut off the escape of the murderer, he had encountered this obstacle, and, fearing lest he should arrive too late, he had leaped the barrier, to the great detriment of his pantaloons, without even asking if there were not a gateway.

One did exist, however. A light gate of lattice-work similar to the fence, turning upon iron hinges and kept closed by a wooden button, allowed one to enter or depart from this side of the garden.

It was straight to this gate that these footprints in the snow led the two policemen.

Some new thought must have struck the younger man, for he paused suddenly.

"Ah!" he murmured, "these two women did not come to Poivrière this evening for the first time."

"Why do you think that, my boy?" inquired Father Absinthe.

"I could almost swear it. How, unless they were

in the habit of coming to this den, could they have been aware of the existence of this gate? Could they have discovered it this dark and foggy night? No; for I, who can, without boasting, say that I have good eyes—I did not see it."

"Ah! yes, that is true!"

"These two women, however, came here without hesitating, without diverging from a straight line; and note that to do this, it was necessary for them to cross the garden diagonally."

The veteran would have given something if he could have found some objection to offer; but unfortunately he could find none.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed, "yours is a droll way of proceeding. You are only a conscript; I am a veteran in the service, and have assisted in more affairs of this sort than you are years old, but never have I seen——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq; "you will see much more. For example, I can prove to you that, although the women knew the exact position of the gate, the man knew it only by hearsay."

"The proof!"

"The fact is easily demonstrated, papa. Study the man's footprints, and you, who are very sharp, will see at once that he deviated greatly from the straight course. He was in such doubt, that he was obliged to search for the gate with his hand stretched out before him—and his fingers have left their imprint on the thin covering of snow that lies upon the upper railing of the fence."

The old man would have been glad to verify this statement for himself, as he said; but Lecoq was in a hurry.

"Let us go on, let us go on!" said he. "You can verify my assertions some other time."

They left the garden and followed the footprints that led them toward the outer boulevards, inclining a little to the right in the direction of the Rue de Patay.

Now there was no longer any need of close attention. No one, save the fugitive, had crossed this lonely waste since the last fall of snow. A child could have followed the track, so clear and distinct was it.

Four impressions, very unlike in character, formed the track; two were those left by the women; the other two, one going and one returning, had been made by the man.

On several occasions the latter had placed his foot exactly on the footprints left by the two women, half effacing them, thus doing away with all doubts as to the precise moment in which he had come.

About a hundred yards from the Poivrière, Lecoq suddenly seized his colleague's arm.

"Halt!" he commanded; "we have reached a good place; I can see unmistakable proofs."

The spot was an abandoned lumber-yard, or rather a reservation belonging to a boat-builder. The ground was strewn with large blocks of granite, some chiselled, some in the rough, and with many long planks and logs of wood.

Before one of these planks, whose surface had evidently been wiped off, all these footprints came together, mingling confusedly.

"Here," declared the young detective, "our fugitives met this man and took counsel with him. One of the women, the one with the little feet, sat down upon this log."

"We should assure ourselves of this more fully," said Father Absinthe, in an oracular tone.

But his companion cut short these desires for verification.

"You—my old friend," said he, "are going to do me the kindness to keep perfectly still; pass me the lantern and do not move."

Lecoq's modest tone had suddenly become so imperious that his colleague dared offer no resistance.

Like a soldier at the command to halt, he remained erect, motionless and mute, following the movements of his friend with a curious and wondering eye.

Quick in his motions, and understanding how to manœuvre the lantern in accordance with his wishes, the young policeman explored the surroundings in a very short space of time.

A bloodhound in pursuit of his prey would have been less alert, less discerning, less agile than he.

He came and went, turned, came back again, hurried on, or paused without any apparent reason; he scrutinized, he questioned everything; the earth, the logs of wood, the blocks of stone, and even the most insignificant objects; sometimes standing, but oftener on his knees, sometimes flat upon his belly, his face so near the ground that his breath must have melted the snow.

He had drawn a tape-line from his pocket: he used it with a carpenter's dexterity, and measured, measured, measured.

And all these movements were accompanied with the wild gestures of a madman, interspersed with oaths or short laughs, with exclamations of disappointment or of delight.

After a quarter of an hour of this strange exercise, he returned to Father Absinthe, placed the lantern on

a stone, wiped his hands on his pocket-handkerchief, and said:

"Now I know all."

"Well, that is saying a great deal!"

"When I say all, I mean all that is connected with this episode of the drama which ended in blood in that hovel there. This expanse of earth, covered with snow, is an immense white page upon which the people we are in search of have written, not only their movements and their goings and comings, but their secret thoughts, the hopes and anxieties that agitated them. What do these footprints say to you, papa? To me they are as much alive as the persons who made them; they breathe, they speak, they accuse!"

The old officer was saying to himself:

"Certainly, this fellow is intelligent; undeniably, he is shrewd; but he is very disagreeable."

"These," pursued Lecoq, "are the facts as I have read them. When the murderer repaired to the Poivrière with the two women, his companion—I should call him his accomplice—came here to wait. He was a man of middle age and tall, wore a soft hat and a shaggy brown overcoat, was probably married, as he had a wedding-ring on the little finger of his right hand——"

The despairing gestures of his companion obliged the speaker to pause.

This description of a person whose existence had but just now been demonstrated, these precise details given in a tone of absolute certainty, overturned all of Father Absinthe's ideas completely, and increased his perplexity.

"This is not well," he growled; "this is not kind. You are poking fun at me. I take the thing seriously;

I listen to you, I obey you in everything, and this is the way you mock me. We find a clew, and instead of following it up, you stop to relate all these absurd stories."

"No," replied his companion, "I am not jesting, and I have told you nothing of which I am not absolutely sure nothing is not strictly and indisputably true."

"And you would have me believe——"

"Fear nothing, papa; I would not have you do violence to your convictions. When I have told you my reasons, and my means of information, you will laugh at the simplicity of the theory that seems so incomprehensible to you now."

"Go on, then," said the good man, in a tone of resignation.

"We had decided, my friend, that the accomplice mounted guard here. The time seemed long, and in order to relieve his impatience, he paced to and fro the length of this log of wood, and occasionally paused in his monotonous promenade to listen. Hearing nothing, he stamped his foot, doubtless exclaiming: 'What the devil has happened to him down there!' He had made about thirty turns (I have counted them), when a sound broke the stillness—the two women were coming."

On hearing Lecoq's recital, all the conflicting sentiments that are awakened in a child's mind by a fairy tale—doubt, faith, anxiety, and hope—filled Father Absinthe's heart.

What should he believe? what should he refuse to believe? He did not know. How was he to tell the true from the false among all these equally surprising assertions?

On the other hand, the gravity of his companion, which certainly was not feigned, dismissed all idea of pleasantry.

Then curiosity began to torture him.

"We had reached the point where the women made their appearance," said he.

"*Mon Dieu!* yes," responded Lecoq; "but here all certainty ceases; no more proofs, only suppositions. Still, I have every reason to believe that our fugitives left the drinking saloon before the beginning of the fight, before the cries that attracted our attention. Who were they? I can only conjecture. I suspect, however, that they were not equals in rank. I am inclined to think that one was the mistress, the other her servant."

"That is proved," ventured the older man, "by the great difference in their feet and in their shoes."

This shrewd observation elicited a smile from the young man in spite of his abstraction.

"This difference," he replied, seriously, "is something; but it was not that which decided me in my opinion. If greater or less perfection of the extremities regulated social distinctions, many mistresses would be servants. What struck me was this:

"When the two women rushed wildly from Mother Chupin's house, the woman with the small feet sprang across the garden with one bound, she darted on some distance in advance of the other. The horror of the situation, the vileness of the den, the horror of the scandal, the thought of a place of safety, inspired her with marvellous energy.

"But her strength, as often happens with delicate and nervous women, lasted only a few seconds. She was not half way from here to the Poivrière when her

speed relaxed, her limbs trembled. Ten steps farther on she tottered and almost fell. Some steps farther, and she became so exhausted that she let go her hold upon her skirts; they trailed upon the snow, tracing a faint circle there.

"Then the woman with the broad foot came to her aid. She seized her companion around the waist; she dragged her along; their footprints here are mingled confusedly; then seeing that her friend was about to fall, she caught her up in her strong arms and carried her—and the footprints made by the woman with the small feet cease."

Was Lecoq merely amusing himself by inventing this story? Was this scene anything but a work of the imagination?

Was this accent of deep and sincere conviction which he imparted to his words only feigned?

Father Absinthe was still in doubt, but he thought of a way in which he might satisfy his uncertainty.

He caught up the lantern and hurried off to examine these footprints which he had not known how to read, which had been speechless to him, but which had yielded their secret to another.

He was obliged to agree with his companion. All that Lecoq had described was written there; he saw the confused footprints, the circle made by the sweeping skirts, the cessation of the tiny imprints.

On his return, his countenace betrayed a respectful and astonished admiration, and it was with a shade of embarrassment that he said:

"You can scarcely blame an old man for being a little like St. Thomas. I have touched it with my fingers, and now I am content to follow you."

The young policeman could not, indeed, blame his colleague for his incredulity.

"Then," Lecoq continued, "the accomplice, who had heard the fugitives coming, ran to meet them, and he aided the woman with the large feet in carrying her companion. The latter must have been really ill, for the accomplice took off his hat and used it in brushing the snow from this plank. Then, thinking the surface was not yet dry enough, he wiped it with the skirt of his overcoat. Were these civilities pure gallantry, or the usual attentions of an inferior? I have asked myself that question.

"This much, however, is certain: while the woman with the small feet was recovering her strength, half reclining upon this board, the other took the accomplice a little to one side, five or six steps away to the left, just by that enormous block of granite.

"There she talked with him, and, as he listened, the man leaned upon the snow-covered stone. His hand left a very distinct imprint there. Then, as the conversation continued, he rested his elbow upon the snowy surface."

Like all men of limited intelligence, Father Absinthe had suddenly passed from unreasoning distrust to unquestioning confidence.

Henceforth he would believe anything, from the same reason that had, at first, made him believe nothing.

With no idea of the bounds of human reasoning and penetration, he saw no limits to the conjectural genius of his companion.

With perfect faith, therefore, he inquired:

"And what was the accomplice saying to the woman with the broad shoes?"

If Lecoq smiled at this naïvete, the other did not suspect it.

"It is rather difficult for me to answer that question," he replied. "I think, however, that the woman was explaining to the man the immensity and imminence of the danger that threatened his companion, and that they were trying to devise some means to rescue him from it. Perhaps she brought him orders given by the murderer. It is certain that she ended by beseeching the accomplice to run to the Poivrière and see what was passing there. And he did so, for his tracks start from this block of granite."

"And only to think," exclaimed the officer, "that we were in the hovel at that very moment. A word from Gevrol, and we might have had handcuffs on the whole gang! How unfortunate!"

Lecoq was not sufficiently disinterested to share his companion's regret.

On the contrary, he gave heartfelt thanks for Gevrol's blunder. Had it not been for that, how would he ever have found an opportunity of interesting himself in an affair that grew more and more mysterious, but which he hoped to fathom finally.

"To conclude," he resumed, "the accomplice soon returned, he had witnessed the scene, he was afraid, and he hastened back. He feared that the thought of exploring the premises might enter the minds of the police. It was to the lady with small feet that he addressed himself. He explained the necessity of flight, and told her that even a moment's delay might be fatal. At his words, she summoned all her energy; she rose, and hastened, clinging to the arm of her companion.

"Did the man indicate the route they were to take, or did they know it themselves? This much is certain;

he accompanied them some distance, in order to watch over them.

"But above the duty of protecting these women, he had a still more sacred duty to perform—that of succoring his accomplice, if possible. He retraced his steps, passed here again, and the last footprint that I can discover leads in the direction of the Rue du Château-des-Rentiers. He wished to know what would become of the murderer, and went to place himself in his path."

Like a dilettante who can scarcely restrain his applause until the close of the *morceau* that delights him, Father Absinthe had been unable to repress his admiration entirely.

But it was not until Lecoq ceased speaking that he gave full vent to his enthusiasm.

"Here is a detective!" he exclaimed. "And they say that Gevrol is shrewd! What has he ever done to compare with this? Ah! shall I tell you what I think? Very well. In comparison with you, the general is only John the Baptist."

Certainly the flattery was gross, but it was impossible to doubt its sincerity. This was the first time that the balmy dew of praise had fallen upon Lecoq's vanity, it delighted him.

"Nonsense," he replied, modestly; "you are too kind, papa. After all, what have I done that is so very clever? I told you that the man was of middle age. It was not difficult to see that after one had examined his heavy and rather dragging step. I told you that he was tall—an easy matter. When I saw that he had been leaning upon that block of granite there to the left, I measured the aforesaid block. It was sixty-seven *mètres* in height, consequently a man who could rest his elbow upon it must be at least six feet high.

The impress of his hand proves that I am not mistaken. On seeing that he had brushed away the snow which covered the plank, I asked myself what he had used; I thought that it might be his cap, and the mark left by the visor proves that I was right.

" Finally, if I have discovered the color and the material of his overcoat, it is only because when he wiped off the wet board, some splinters of the wood tore off a few tiny flakes of brown wool, which I found, and which will figure in the trial. But what does this amount to, after all? Nothing. We have discovered only the first elements of the affair. We hold the clew, however; we will follow it to the end. Onward, then! "

The old officer was electrified, and, like an echo, he repeated:

" Forward! "

CHAPTER V

That night the vagabonds, who had taken refuge in the neighborhood of the Poivrière, slept but little, and that an uneasy slumber, broken by sudden starts, and troubled with frightful dreams of a descent of the police upon them.

Awakened by the report of the murderer's pistol, and supposing it the result of a collision between the police and some of their own comrades, most of the frequenters of the locality prowled about eagerly listening and watching, and ready to take flight at the least sign of danger.

At first they could discover nothing at all suspicious.

But later, about two o'clock in the morning, just as they were beginning to feel secure again, the fog

lifted a little, and they witnessed a phenomenon well calculated to arouse their anxiety.

Upon the unoccupied tract of land, which the people of that quarter called "the plain," a small but very bright light was seen describing the most capricious evolutions.

It moved here and there without any apparent aim, tracing the most inexplicable zigzags, sometimes sinking to the earth, sometimes rising, sometimes motionless, and the next second flying off like a ball.

In spite of the place and the season of the year, the less ignorant among the vagabonds believed it to be the light of the *ignis-fatuus*, one of those luminous meteors that rise from the marshes and float about in the atmosphere at the bidding of the wind.

This *ignis-fatuus* was the lantern by whose light the two policemen were pursuing their investigations.

Before leaving the cabin where he had so suddenly revealed himself to his first disciple, Lecoq found himself involved in a cruel perplexity.

He had not the boldness and promptness of decision that is the gift of a prosperous past; and he was hesitating between two undertakings, which were equally reasonable, and each of which offered equally strong probabilities of success.

He stood there between two paths, that made by the two women on the one side, that made by the accomplice on the other.

Which should he take? For he could not hope to follow both.

Seated upon the plank where the woman had rested a few moments before, with his hand pressed upon his forehead, he reflected; he weighed his chances.

"If I follow the man I shall learn nothing that I do

not know already. He has gone to hover round the party; he has followed them at a distance; he has seen them lock up his accomplice, and he is undoubtedly prowling around the station-house. If I hurried in pursuit could I hope to overtake him, to capture him? No; too long a time has elapsed."

Father Absinthe listened to the monologue with intense curiosity, as anxious as an unsophisticated person who is questioning a clairvoyant in regard to some lost articles, and who is awaiting the response of the oracle.

"To follow the woman," continued the young man, "to what would that lead? Perhaps to an important discovery; perhaps to nothing."

He preferred the unknown with all its chances of failure, and all its chances of success, as well.

He rose; his course was decided.

"Ah, well!" he exclaimed, "I choose the unknown. We are going, Father Absinthe, to follow the footprints of these two women, and wherever they lead us we will go."

Inspired with equal ardor they began their walk. At the end of the path upon which they had entered they perceived, as in a magic glass, the one, the fruits, the other, the glory of success.

They hurried forward. At first it was only play to follow the distinct footprints that led toward the Seine.

But it was not long before they were obliged to proceed more slowly.

On leaving the waste ground they arrived at the outer limits of civilization, so to speak; and strange footprints mingled constantly with the footprints of the fugitives, mixing with them, and sometimes effacing them.

In many localities, on account of exposure, or the

nature of the soil, the thaw had done its work, and there were large patches of ground entirely free from snow.

In such cases they lost the clew, and it took all Lecoq's sagacity, and all his companion's good-will, to find it again.

On such occasions Father Absinthe planted his cane in the earth, near the last footprint that had been discovered, and Lecoq and himself hunted on the ground around this starting-point, after the fashion of blood-hounds who have been thrown off the scent.

Then it was that the lantern moved about so strangely.

More than a dozen times, in spite of all their efforts, they would have lost the clew entirely had it not been for the elegant shoes worn by the lady with the little feet.

These had such small and extremely high heels that the impression they left could not be mistaken. They sank down three or four inches in the snow, or in the mud, and their tell-tale impress remained as clear and distinct as that of seal upon wax.

Thanks to these heels, the pursuers were able to discover that the two fugitives had not gone up the Rue de Patay, as might have been supposed. Probably they had considered the street too much frequented, and too well lighted.

They had only crossed it, just below the Rue de la Croix-Rouge, and had profited by an empty space between houses to regain the open ground.

"Certainly these women were well acquainted with the lay of the land," murmured Lecoq.

They did indeed know the topography so well that, on quitting the Rue de Patay, they had suddenly turned

to the right, in order to avoid several large ditches, which had been opened by persons who were seeking earth to be used in the manufacture of brick.

But the trail was recovered, and they followed it as far as the Rue du Chevaleret.

Here the footprints abruptly ceased.

Lecoq discovered eight or ten footmarks left by the woman who wore the broad shoes, but that was all.

The earth, it is true, was not in a condition to be of much assistance in an exploration of this nature. There had been a great deal of passing in the Rue du Chevaleret, and there was but little snow left on the pavement, and the middle of the street was transformed into a river of slush.

"Did these people recollect, at last, that the snow might betray them? Did they take the middle of the street?" growled the young officer.

Certainly they could not have crossed to a vacant space as they had done just before, for on the other side of the street extended the long wall of a factory.

"Ah!" sighed Father Absinthe, "we have our labor for our pains."

But Lecoq possessed a temperament that refused to acknowledge defeat.

Animated by the cold anger of a man who sees the object which he was about to seize disappear from before his very eyes, he recommenced his search, and was well repaid for his efforts.

"I understand!" he cried suddenly. "I comprehend—I see!"

Father Absinthe drew near. *He* did not see nor divine anything; but he no longer doubted the powers of his companion.

"Look here," said Lecoq; "what do you see?"

"Marks left by the wheels of a carriage that turned here."

"Very well, papa; these tracks explain all. When they reached this spot, our fugitives saw the light of an approaching *fiacre*, which was returning to Paris. It was empty; it was their salvation. They waited here, and when it came nearer they called to the coachman. Doubtless they promised him a generous *pour boire;* this is evident, since he consented to go back again. He turned short here; they entered the carriage, and that is why these footprints go no farther."

This explanation was not pleasing to his companion.

"Have we made any great progress now that we know that?" he asked.

Lecoq could not restrain an impulse to shrug his shoulder.

"Did you expect that the tracks made by these fugitives would lead us through Paris and up to their very doors?" he asked.

"No; but——"

"Then what would you ask more? Do you think that I shall not know how to find this coachman tomorrow? He was returning with his empty carriage, his day's work was ended; hence, his stable is in this neighborhood. Do you suppose that he will have forgotten that he took up two persons on the Rue du Chevaleret? He will tell us where he deposited them; but that will not do us any good, for they, of course, have not given him their true address. But he can give us a description of them, tell us how they were dressed and describe their appearance, their manner, and their age. And with that, and what we already know——"

An eloquent gesture expressed the remainder of his thought; then he added:

"We must now go back to the Poivrière, and go quickly. And you, my friend, may now extinguish your lantern."

CHAPTER VI

While doing his best to keep pace with his companion, who was in such haste to get back to the Poivrière that he almost ran, Father Absinthe's thoughts were as busy as his legs, and an entirely new idea was awakened in his mind.

During the twenty-five years that he had been connected with the police force, the good man—to use his own expression—had seen many of his colleagues walk over his body, and win, after only a few months' work, a promotion that his long years of service had not gained for him.

In these cases he had not failed to accuse his superiority of injustice, and his fortunate rivals of gross flattery.

In his opinion, seniority was the only claim to advancement—the only, the best, the most respectable claim.

When he said, "It is infamous to pass over an old member of the service," he summed up his opinions, his griefs, and all his bitterness in that one sentence.

Ah, well! to-night Father Absinthe discovered that there is something beyond seniority, and that there might be good and sufficient reasons for what he had formerly regarded as favoritism. He secretly confessed that this new-comer, whom he had treated so carelessly, had just followed up a clew as he, veteran though he was, would never have succeeded in doing.

But communing with himself was not this good

man's forte; he soon began to weary of it, and on reaching a place where they were obliged to proceed more slowly on account of the badness of the road, he deemed it a favorable opportunity to resume the conversation.

"You say nothing, comrade," he ventured, "and one might swear that you were not content."

This surprising result of the old man's reflections would have amazed Lecoq if his mind had not been a hundred leagues away.

"Really, I am not content," he responded.

"And why, pray? Only ten minutes ago you were as gay as a lark."

"Then I did not see the misfortune that threatens us."

"A misfortune!"

"A very great misfortune. Do you not perceive that the weather has undeniably moderated? It is evident that the wind is from the south. The fog has disappeared, but the sky is cloudy and the weather is threatening. It will rain in less than an hour."

"A few drops are falling now; I just felt one."

These words produced much the same effect on Lecoq that a blow of a whip produces on a spirited horse. He sprang forward, and, adopting a still more hurried pace, he exclaimed:

"Let us make haste! let us make haste!"

The old policeman followed him as in duty bound; but his mind was, if possible, still more troubled by the replies of his young companion.

A great misfortune! The wind from the south! Rain! He did not see, and he could not see the connection.

Greatly puzzled, and not a little anxious, he asked

an explanation, although he had but little more breath than was necessary to enable him to continue the forced march that he was making.

"Upon my word," said he, "I have racked my brains——"

His companion took pity on his anxiety.

"What!" he exclaimed, as he hastened forward, "you do not understand that our investigation, my success, and your reward, are dependent upon those black clouds which the wind is driving toward us!"

"Oh!"

"Twenty minutes of even a gentle rain, and our time and our labor will be lost. If it rains, the snow will melt, and farewell to our proofs. Let us go on—let us go on more quickly! You know very well that in such cases it is necessary to bring something more than words. If we declare to the coroner that we have seen these footprints, he will ask, where? And what can we say? If we swear by all the gods that we have seen the footprints of a man and of two women, the judge will say, 'Let me see them.' And who would feel sheepish then! Father Absinthe and Lecoq. Besides, Gevrol would not fail to declare that we were saying what was not true, in order to enhance our own value, and to humiliate him."

"For example!"

"Faster, papa, faster; you will have all day to-morrow to be indignant. Perhaps it will not rain. In that case, these perfect, clear, and recognizable footprints will be the ruin of the culprits. How can we preserve them? By what process could we solidify them? I would deluge them with my blood if that would cause them to congeal."

Father Absinthe was thinking that his share of the labor thus far had been the least important.

He had held the lantern.

But here was a chance for him to acquire a real and substantial right to the prospective reward.

"I know," he declared, "a method by which one could preserve these marks in the snow."

At these words the younger man stopped short.

"Do you know—you?" he interrupted.

"Yes, I know," replied the old officer, with the evident satisfaction of a man who has gained his revenge. "They invented a way at the time of that affair at the White House. It occurred last winter, in the month of December."

"I recollect."

"Ah! well, there was upon the snow in the courtyard an impress that attracted the attention of a detective. He said that the whole evidence depended upon that alone, and that it was worth more than ten years of hard work in following up the case. Naturally he desired to preserve it. They sent for a great chemist——"

"Go on, go on."

"I have never seen the method put into practice, but an expert told me all about it, and showed me the mould they obtained. He even told me that he explained it to me fully, on account of my profession, and for my instruction."

Lecoq was trembling with impatience.

"And how did they obtain the mould?" he asked, brusquely.

"Wait; I was just going to explain. They take cards of the best gelatine, and they allow it to soak in cold water. When it becomes thoroughly softened,

they heat it until it forms a liquid not too thin, nor too thick. They allow this to cool until it is just cool enough, and then pour a nice little covering of it upon the footprint——"

Lecoq felt the irritation that is natural to a person after he has listened to a bad joke, or when one finds that one has lost time in listening to a fool.

"Enough!" he interrupted, angrily. "That is Hugonlin's method; it can be found in all the manuals. It is excellent, no doubt, but how can it serve us? Have you any gelatine about you?"

"No."

"Nor have I. You might as well have counselled me to pour melted lead upon the footprints to fix them."

They continued their way, and five minutes later, without having exchanged another word, they re-entered the Widow Chupin's hovel.

The first impulse of the older man would have been to rest, to breathe. Lecoq did not give him time to do so.

"Make haste; get me an earthen dish, a plate, a vase; bring me some water; gather together all the boards and old boxes you can find lying about."

While his companion was obeying him, Lecoq armed himself with a fragment of one of the broken bottles, and began scraping away furiously at the plastered wall that separated the two rooms.

His intelligence, disconcerted at first by the imminence of the unexpected catastrophe, had regained its equilibrium. He had reflected; he had thought of a way by which failure might possibly be averted—and he hoped.

When he had accumulated at his feet seven or eight handfuls of the fine plaster-dust, he mixed half of it

with a little water, forming a thin paste, and he left the rest untouched on the side of the plate.

"Now, papa," said he, "come and hold the light for me."

When once in the garden, the young man sought for the deepest and most distinct of the footprints, knelt beside it, and began his experiment, trembling with anxiety.

He then sprinkled upon the impression a fine coating of the dry plaster, then upon this coating, with infinite care, he poured his liquid solution, drop by drop.

What happiness! the experiment was successful! It united in a homogeneous mass, forming a perfect model of the impress. And after an hour's labor, he possessed half a dozen of these casts, which might, perhaps, be a little wanting in clearness of outline, but which were quite perfect enough to be used as evidence.

Lecoq had reason for his alarm; it was already beginning to rain.

He had, however, plenty of time to cover with the boxes and pieces of board which Father Absinthe had collected a number of these footprints, which he had, so to speak, put beyond the reach of a thaw.

Now he could breathe. The coroner might come.

CHAPTER VII

It was some distance from the Poivrière to the Rue du Chevaleret, even by way of the plain that made any *détours* unnecessary.

It had taken at least four hours for Lecoq and his colleague to collect their elements of information.

And, meantime, the Widow Chupin's cabin had remained open, accessible to any chance visitor.

Still, when the young policeman had on his return remembered this neglect of the first precautions, he did not feel alarmed.

Considering all the circumstances, it was very difficult to believe that any serious harm could have resulted from this carelessness.

For who would have been likely, after the hour of midnight, to visit this drinking saloon? Its bad name erected a sort of bulwark around it. The most daring of vagrants did not drink there without some disquietude, fearing, if the liquor caused them to lose consciousness, that they might be robbed or perhaps murdered.

Hence it could have been only a very reckless person who, feeling a few *sous* left in his pocket on returning late at night from the ball at the Rainbow, would have been attracted to this notoriously dangerous saloon by the light that streamed through the open door.

But a single glance at the interior would have been enough to put the bravest to flight.

In less than a second the young policeman had weighed all these possibilities, but he had not breathed a word to Father Absinthe.

When, little by little, the excitement caused by his hopes and his success in his experiment had died away, and he had returned to his habitual calmness, he made a careful inspection of the abode, and was by no means satisfied with his conduct.

He had experimented upon Father Absinthe with his new system of investigation, as an apprentice in the tribune tries his powers before his least gifted friends, not before the best.

He had overwhelmed the veteran by his superiority; he had crushed him.

Great merit and wonderful victory! Father Absinthe was a fool; he, Lecoq, thought himself very fine —was there any reason why he should boast?

If he could only give some startling proofs of his energy or of his penetration! But what had he accomplished? Was the mystery solved? Was his success more than problematical? When one thread is drawn out, the skein is not untangled.

This night would undoubtedly decide his future as a detective, so he swore that if he could not conquer his vanity, he would, at least, oblige himself to conceal it.

Hence it was in a very modest tone that he addressed his companion.

"We have done all that we can outside," said he; "now would it not be wise to busy ourselves with the interior?"

Everything looked exactly as it did when the two men left the room. A candle; whose wick was smoking and charred, threw its red light upon the same scene of disorder, and upon the rigid features of the three victims.

Without losing a moment, Lecoq began to pick up and to study all the objects scattered upon the floor. Some of these still remained intact. It seemed that the Widow Chupin had recoiled from the expense of a brick floor, judging the ground upon which the cabin was built quite good enough for the feet of her customers. The ground, which must have been solid and beaten down originally, had, by use, by the damp weather and the thaw, become scarcely less muddy than the plain itself.

The first-fruits of his search were a large salad-bowl,

and a big iron spoon, which was too much twisted and bent not to have been used as a weapon during the conflict.

It was evident that when the quarrel began the victims were regaling themselves with that mixture of water, wine and sugar, known along the *barrière* under the name of wine *à la Française.*

After the salad-bowl, the two men picked up five of those horrible glasses used in drinking-saloons, heavy and very thick at the bottom, which look as if they ought to contain half a bottle, but which, in reality, contain almost nothing. Three were broken, two were whole.

There had been wine in these five glasses—the same wine *à la Française.* They could see it; but, for greater surety, Lecoq applied his tongue to the bluish mixture remaining in the bottom of each glass.

"The devil!" he murmured, with an astonished air.

Then he examined successively the bottoms of all the over-turned tables. Upon one of these, the one nearest the fireplace and the window, they could distinguish the still wet marks of the five glasses, of the salad-bowl, and even of the spoons.

This circumstance the young officer very properly regarded as a matter of the greatest importance, for it proved clearly that five persons had emptied the salad-bowl in company. But which persons?

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Lecoq in two entirely different tones. "Then the two women could not have been with the murderer!"

A very simple mode of discovery had presented itself. It was to see what the other glasses had contained. They discovered one, similar in form to the others, but much smaller. It had contained brandy.

Then these women had not been with the murderer, therefore he could not have fought because the other men had insulted them.

This discovery had suddenly proved the incorrectness of his suppositions. It was an unexpected check, and he was mourning over it in silence, when Father Absinthe, who had not ceased ferreting about, uttered a cry of surprise.

The young man turned; he saw that his companion had become very pale.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Someone has been here in our absence."

"Impossible!"

It was not impossible—it was true.

When Gevrol had torn the apron off of Widow Chupin, he had thrown it upon the steps of the stairs; neither of the policemen had touched it afterward. Ah, well! the pockets of this apron had been turned inside out; this was a proof, this was evidence.

Lecoq was overcome with consternation, and the contraction of his features revealed the struggle in his mind.

"Who could have been here?" he murmured. "Robbers? That is improbable."

Then after a long silence, which his companion took good care not to interrupt:

"The person who came here, who dared to penetrate this abode guarded by the corpses of those murdered men—this person could have been none other than the accomplice. But it is not enough to suspect this; it is necessary to know it. I must know. I will know!"

They searched for a long time, and it was not until after an hour of earnest work that, in front of the door forced open by the police, they discovered in the mud,

just inside the marks made by Gevrol's stamping, a footprint that bore a close resemblance to those left by the man who had entered the garden.

They compared the impressions and recognized the same designs formed by the nails upon the sole of the boot.

"It must have been he!" exclaimed Lecoq. "He watched us, he saw us go away, and he entered here. But why? What pressing, irresistible necessity made him decide to brave such imminent danger?"

He seized his companion's hand, and nearly crushing it in his excitement:

"Why?" continued he, violently. "Ah! I understand only too well. There had been left, or forgotten or lost here, some article that would have served to throw light on this horrible affair. And to obtain it, to find it, he decided to run this terrible risk. And to think that it was my fault, my fault alone, that this convincing proof escaped us! And I thought myself so shrewd! What a lesson! The door should have been locked; any fool would have thought of it——"

He checked himself, and remained with open mouth and distended eyes, pointing with his finger to one of the corners of the room.

"What is the matter?" demanded his frightened companion.

Lecoq made no reply, but slowly and with the stiff movements of a somnambulist, he approached the spot to which he had pointed, stooped, picked up something, and said:

"My folly does not deserve this good fortune."

The object he had picked up was an ear-ring of the sort that jewellers call buttons. It was composed of a

single very large diamond. The setting was of marvellous workmanship.

"This diamond," he declared, after a moment's examination, "must be worth at least five or six thousand francs."

"Are you in earnest?"

"I think I would be willing to take my oath on it."

He had not said "I think," a few hours before; he had said very boldly, "I swear." But the first mistake was a lesson that would not be forgotten so long as he lived.

"Perhaps it was the same diamond ear-ring that the accomplice came to seek."

"This supposition is scarcely admissible. In that case, he would not have sought for it in Mother Chupin's apron. No, he must have been seeking something else—a letter, for example."

The older man was not listening; he had taken the ear-ring, and was examining it in his turn.

"And to think," he murmured, astonished by the brilliancy of the stone, "to think that a woman who had ten thousand francs' worth of jewels in her ears should have come to the Poivrière. Who would have believed it?"

Lecoq shook his head thoughtfully. "Yes, it is very strange, very improbable, very absurd. And yet we shall see many things as strange if we ever arrive—which I very much doubt—at a solution of this mysterious affair."

CHAPTER VIII

Day was breaking, raw, cheerless, and gloomy, when Lecoq and his colleague concluded their investigation.

There was not an inch of space that had not been explored, carefully examined, and studied, one might almost say, with a magnifying glass.

There remained now only to make the report.

The younger man seated himself at the table, and began by drawing a plan of the scene of the murder, which would, of course, be of great service in making others understand his recital.

Thus it will be seen that in this explanatory chart Lecoq had not once written his name.

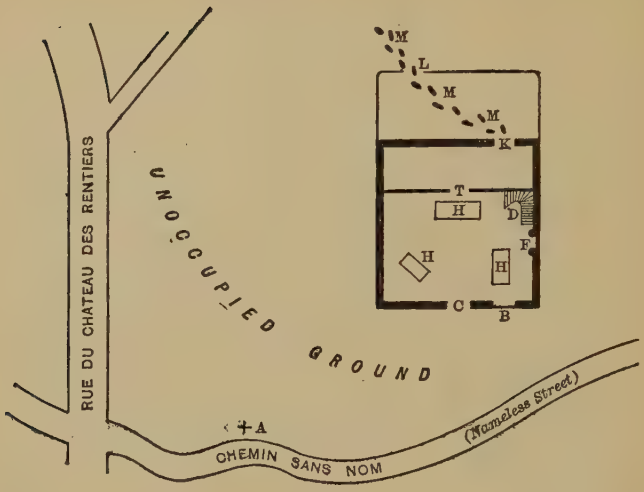
In noting the things that he had imagined or discovered, he referred to himself simply as one of the police.

This was not modesty so much as calculation. By hiding one's self on well-chosen occasions, one gains greater notoriety when one merges from the shadow.

It was also through cunning that he gave Gevrol such a prominent position.

These tactics, rather subtle, perhaps, but after all perfectly fair, could not fail to call attention to the man who had shown himself so efficient when the efforts of his chief had been confined only to breaking open the door.

The document he drew up was not a verbal process, an act reserved for the officers of the police judiciary—it was a simple report, that would be admitted under the title of an inquiry and yet he composed it with the same care a young general would have displayed in the bulletin of his first victory.



A.—The point where the squad of police, under command of Inspector Gevrol, heard the cries of the victims.

(The distance from this point to the hut known as the Poivrière is only one hundred and twenty-three yards ; hence, it may reasonably be supposed that these cries were the first that were uttered, and consequently that the combat had just commenced.)

B.—The window covered with shutters, through the openings of which one of the police was able to see the scene within.

C.—The door forced open by Inspector Gevrol.

D.—Staircase upon which the Widow Chupin was seated, crying.

(It was upon the third step of this staircase that the Widow Chupin's apron was afterwards found, the pockets turned inside out.)

F.—Fire-place.

HHH.—Tables.

(The remnants of the salad-bowl and of the five glasses were found scattered on the floor between the points F and B.)

T.—Door communicating with the back room of the hovel, before which the armed murderer was standing.

K.—Back door of the hut, opening into the garden, by which the agent of police, who thought of cutting off the murderer's retreat, entered.

L.—Gate of the garden, opening upon the unoccupied ground.

MM.—Footprints on the snow, discovered by the policeman remaining at the Poivrière, after the departure of Inspector Gevrol.

While he was drawing and writing, Father Absinthe leaned over his shoulder to watch him.

The plan amazed that worthy man. He had seen a great deal; but he had always supposed that it was necessary to be an engineer, an architect, or, at least, a carpenter, to execute such a work. Not at all. With a tape-line with which to take some measurements, and a bit of board in place of a rule, this inexperienced colleague had accomplished the miracle.

His respect for Lecoq was greatly augmented.

It is true that the worthy veteran had not noticed the explosion of the young policeman's vanity, nor his return to his former modest demeanor. He had not observed his alarm, nor his perplexity, nor his lack of penetration.

After a few moments, Father Absinthe ceased watching his companion. He felt weary after the labors of the night, his head was burning, and he shivered.

His knees trembled.

Perhaps, though he was by no means sensitive, he felt the influence of the horrors that surrounded him, and which seemed more sinister than ever in the bleak light of morning.

He began to ferret in the cupboards, and at last succeeded in discovering—oh, great good fortune!—a bottle of brandy, three-quarters full. He hesitated for an instant, then he poured out a glassful, and drained it at a single draught.

"Will you have some?" he inquired of his companion. "It is not a very famous brand, to be sure; but it is just as good; it makes one's blood circulate and enlivens one."

Lecoq refused; he did not need to be enlivened. All his faculties were hard at work. He intended that, after

a single reading of the report, the judge should say: "Let the officer who has drawn up this document be sent for." His future depended upon this order.

He endeavored to be brief, clear, and concise, to plainly indicate how his suspicions on the subject of the murder had been aroused, how they had increased, and how they had been confirmed. He explained by what series of deductions he had succeeded in establishing the truth, which, if it was not the truth, was at least plausible enough to serve as the basis of further investigation.

Then he enumerated the articles of conviction ranged on the table before him.

There were the flakes of brown wool collected upon the plank, the valuable ear-ring, the models of the different footprints in the garden, and Widow Chupin's apron with its pockets turned inside out.

There was also the murderer's pistol, of whose five barrels three were still undischarged.

This weapon, although unornamented, was remarkably well finished, and bore the name of one of the best armorers in London: Stephen, 14 Skinner Street.

Lecoq felt convinced that by examining the bodies of the victims he would find other, and perhaps very valuable information; but this he dared not do. He was still too inexperienced to hazard such a step. Besides, he understood if he ran such a risk, Gevrol, furious at his own mistake, would not fail to declare that, by changing the attitude of the bodies, he had rendered a satisfactory examination by the physicians impossible.

He consoled himself, however, and he was re-reading his report, modifying this or that expression, when Father Absinthe, who was standing upon the threshold of the outer door, called him.

"Is there anything new?" responded Lecoq.

"Here are Gevrol and two of our comrades bringing the commissioner and two other gentlemen with them."

It was, indeed, the commissioner of police who was coming, quite interested in this triple murder that had stained his arondissement, but not very much disturbed by it.

Why should he be troubled about it?

Gevrol, whose opinions in such matters must be regarded as an authority, had taken care to reassure him when he went to arouse him from his slumbers.

"It was only a fight between some old offenders; former jail-birds, habitués of the Poivrière," he had said to him.

"If all these wretches would kill one another, we might have some peace."

He added that the murderer had been arrested and placed in confinement, and consequently the case was not urgent.

The commissioner therefore saw nothing improper in waiting until morning before beginning the inquest.

He had seen the murderer, reported the case, and now he was coming—not in too much haste—accompanied by two physicians who had been appointed by the government attorney to make *Medico-legales* reports in such cases.

They were also accompanied by a sergeant-major of the 53d regiment of light infantry, summoned by the commissioner to identify, if possible, the murdered man, who wore a uniform, and who, if one might believe the number engraved upon the buttons of his overcoat, belonged to the 53d regiment, now stationed at the fort.

Inspector Gevrol was even less disturbed than the commissioner.

He whistled as he walked along, flourishing his cane, which never left his hand, and making merry at the discomfiture of the presumptuous fool who had desired to remain to glean where he, the experienced and skilful officer, had perceived nothing.

As soon as he was within hearing distance, the inspector called to Father Absinthe, who, after warning Lecoq, remained on the threshold, leaning against the door-post, puffing his pipe, as immovable as a sphinx.

"Ah, well, old man!" cried Gevrol, "have you any great melodrama, very dark and very mysterious, to relate to us?"

"I myself have nothing to relate," replied the worthy addressed, without even drawing his pipe from his lips. "I am too stupid; that is perfectly understood. But Monsieur Lecoq will tell you something that will astonish you."

This title, "monsieur," which the old policeman bestowed upon his colleague, displeased Gevrol so much that he pretended not to understand.

"Who?" said he; "of whom are you speaking?"

"Of my colleague, of course, who is now busy finishing his report—of Monsieur Lecoq."

Although unintentionally, the good man had certainly become the young policeman's god-father. From that day forward, to his enemies as well as to his friends, he was, and he remained, Monsieur Lecoq.

"Ah! ah!" said the inspector, whose hearing was evidently impaired. "Ah, he has discovered——"

"The pot of roses which others did not scent, general."

By this remark Father Absinthe made an enemy of

his superior officer. But Lecoq had won him entirely. He had taken sides with Lecoq, and *to* Lecoq, against everyone else, if necessary, he had determined to attach himself, and to share good fortune or bad fortune with him.

"We will see," murmured the inspector, mentally resolving to have an eye on this youth whom success might transform into a rival.

He said no more. The little party which he preceded had arrived, and he stood aside to make way for the commissioner of police.

This commissioner was not a *débutant*. He had served for many years, and yet he could not repress a movement of horror on entering the Poivrière.

The sergeant-major of the 53d who followed him, an old soldier decorated and medaled, was still more overcome with horror. He became as pale as the corpses that were lying there, and was obliged to lean against the wall for support.

Only the two physicians retained their stoical indifference.

Lecoq had risen, his report in his hand; he had bowed, and, assuming a respectful attitude, was waiting to be interrogated.

"You must have passed a frightful night," said the commissioner, kindly; "and quite unnecessarily, since any investigation was superfluous."

"I think, however," replied the young man, armed with diplomacy, "that my time has not been entirely lost. I have conformed to the instruction of my superior officer; I have searched the premises thoroughly, and I have ascertained many things. I have, for example, acquired the certainty that the murderer had a friend, possibly an accomplice, of whom I can give

quite a close description. He must have been of middle age, and wore, if I am not mistaken, a soft cap and a brown woollen overcoat; as for his boots——"

"Thunder!" exclaimed Gevrol, "and I——"

He stopped short, like a man whose impulse had exceeded his discretion, and who would have gladly taken back his words.

"And you?" questioned the commissioner. "What do you mean?"

Furious, but having gone too far to draw back, the inspector was obliged to act as his own executioner.

"I was about to say that this morning, about an hour ago, while I was waiting for you, Monsieur le Commissaire, before the station-house of the Barrière d'Italie, where the murderer is confined, I saw at some little distance an individual whose appearance was not unlike that of the man described by Lecoq. This man appeared to be greatly intoxicated; he reeled and staggered against the walls. He tried to cross the street, but fell down in the middle of it, in such a position that he would inevitably have been crushed by the first passing vehicle."

Lecoq turned away his head; he did not wish them to read in his eyes how perfectly he understood the whole game.

"Seeing this," pursued Gevrol, "I called two men and asked them to aid me in raising the poor wretch. We went to him; he had apparently fallen asleep; we shook him—we made him sit up; we told him that he could not remain there, but immediately he flew into a furious rage. He swore at us, he threatened us, he tried to fight us. And, upon my word! we took him to the station-house, and left him there to recover from his debauch."

"Did you shut him up in the same room with the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Naturally. You know very well there are but two cages in the station-house at the *barrière*—one for the men, the other for the women, consequently——"

The commissioner seemed thoughtful. "Ah! this is very unfortunate," he murmured; "and there is no remedy."

"Pardon me, there is one," objected Gevrol. "I can send one of my men to the station-house with an order to detain the drunken man——"

Lecoq interrupted him with a gesture.

"Trouble lost," he said, coldly. "If this individual is an accomplice, he has become sober, rest assured of that, and is far away by this time."

"Then what is one to do?" demanded the inspector, with an ironical air. "May one be permitted to inquire the opinion of Monsieur Lecoq?"

"I think chance offered us a splendid opportunity, and we did not know how to seize it; and that the best thing we can do now is to make our period of mourning for it as short as possible, and to stand ready to embrace the next opportunity that offers itself."

Gevrol was, however, determined to send one of his men to the station-house; and when the messenger had departed, Lecoq commenced the reading of his report.

He read it rapidly, refraining as much as possible from placing the decisive proofs in strong relief, reserving these for his own benefit; but so strong was the logic of his deductions, that he was frequently interrupted by approving remarks from the commissioner, and by the "very well!" of the physicians.

Gevrol, who alone represented the opposition, ele-

vated his shoulders until they entirely concealed his neck, and became literally green with jealousy.

The report concluded:

"I think that you alone, young man, have judged correctly in this affair," said the commissioner. "I may be mistaken; but your explanations have made me look at the attitude assumed by the murderer while I was questioning him (which was only for a moment), in an entirely different light. He refused, obstinately refused, to make any reply to my questions. He would not even consent to tell his name."

He was silent for a moment, reviewing the past circumstances in his mind, and it was in a serious tone that he added:

"We are, I feel convinced, in the presence of one of those mysterious crimes, the causes of which are beyond the reach of human sagacity—one of those mysterious cases which human justice never can reach."

Lecoq hid a slight smile.

"Oh!" thought he, "we will see about that."

CHAPTER IX

No consultation held at the bedside of a man dying of some unknown disease ever took place in the presence of two physicians so utterly unlike as those who, upon the requisition of the government attorney, accompanied the commissioner of police.

One large, old, and totally bald, wore a broad-brimmed hat, and an overcoat of antique cut, over his ill-fitting black coat. He was one of those modest *savants* whom one encounters sometimes in the by-places of Paris—one of those healers devoted to their

art, who too often die in obscurity, after rendering immense service to mankind.

He had the gracious calmness of a man who, having seen much of human misery, comprehended everything; and no troubled conscience could sustain his searching glance, which was as keen as his lancet.

The other, young, fresh, light-haired, and jovial, was even foppishly attired; and his white hands were encased in handsome fur gloves. His glance was ever caressing or smiling. He was a man who would have been likely to recommend all those infallible panaceas invented each month in the chemist's laboratories and advertised on the fourth page of the newspapers. He had probably written more than one article upon "Medicine for the use of all mankind."

"I will request you, gentlemen, to begin your duties by examining that one of the victims who wears the military costume. Here is a sergeant-major summoned to answer a question of identity, whom I must send back to his quarters as soon as possible."

The two physicians responded with a gesture of assent, and, aided by Father Absinthe and another agent of police, they lifted the body and laid it upon two tables, which had previously been placed end to end.

They were not obliged to make any note of the attitude in which they found the body, since the unfortunate man, who was still alive when the police entered the cabin, had been moved before he expired.

"Approach, sergeant," ordered the commissioner, "and look carefully at this man."

It was with very evident repugnance that the old soldier obeyed.

"What is the uniform that he wears?"

"It is the uniform of the 53d regulars, 2d battalion, company of light infantry."

"Do you recognize him?"

"Not at all."

"Are you sure that he does not belong to your regiment?"

"I cannot say certainly; there are some conscripts at the depot whom I have never seen. But I am ready to swear that he has never formed a part of the 2d battalion—which, by the way, is mine—in the division of light infantry, of which I am sergeant-major."

Lecoq, who had until now remained in the background, stepped forward.

"It might be well," he suggested, "to note the numbers marked upon the other articles of clothing."

"That is a very good idea," said the commissioner, approvingly.

"Here is his hat," added the young policeman. "It bears the number 3,129."

They followed Lecoq's advice, and soon discovered that each article of clothing upon the unfortunate man bore a different number.

"*Mon Dieu!*" murmured the sergeant; "there is every indication— But it is very singular."

Invited to scrupulously verify his assertion, the brave trooper evidently made an effort to collect all his intellectual faculties.

"I would stake my epaulettes that this man never was a soldier," he said at last. "This individual must have disguised himself to take part in the Shrove Sunday carnival."

"Why do you think that?"

"*Dame!* I know this better than I can explain it. I know it by his hair, by his nails, by his whole appear-

ance, by a certain *je na sais quoi;* in short, I know it by everything and by nothing. And see, the poor devil did not even know how to put on his shoes; he has laced his gaiters wrong side outward."

Evidently further doubt was impossible after this evidence, which confirmed the truth of Lecoq's first remark to Inspector Gevrol.

"Still, if this person was a civilian, how could he have procured this clothing?" insisted the commissioner. "Could he have borrowed it from the men in your company?"

"Yes, that is barely possible; but it is difficult to believe it."

"Is there no way by which you could ascertain?"

"Oh! very easily. I have only to run over to the fort and order an inspection of clothing."

"Do that," approved the commissioner; "it would be an excellent way of getting at the truth."

But Lecoq had just thought of a method just as convincing, and much more prompt.

"One word, sergeant," said he. "Is not the cast-off and condemned clothing of your men sold at public auction?"

"Yes; at least once a year, after the inspection."

"And are not the articles thus sold marked in some way?"

"Assuredly."

"Then see if there is not some mark of this kind upon the uniform of this poor wretch."

The officer turned up the collar of his coat and examined the waistband of the pantaloons, and said:

"You are right; these are condemned garments."

The eyes of the young policeman sparkled, but they emitted only a single gleam of triumph.

"We must, then, believe that this poor devil had purchased this costume," he observed. "Where? Necessarily at the Temple, in the store of one of those merchants who deal in military clothing. There are only five or six of these establishments. I will go from one to another of them, and the person who sold this clothing will certainly recognize it by some trade mark."

"And that will assist us very much," growled Gevrol.

The sergeant-major, to his great relief, received permission to retire, but not without having been warned that very probably the commissioner would require his deposition.

The moment had come to search the body of the pretended soldier, and the commissioner, who performed this duty himself, hoped that some information as to the identity of this man would be revealed.

He proceeded with his task, dictating at the same time to one of the men his *procès-verbal;* that is to say, a minute description of all the articles he found upon the dead man's person.

These were: in the right-hand pocket of the pantaloons, some smoking tobacco, a pipe, and a few matches; in the left pocket, a very much soiled leather pocket-book, containing seven francs and sixty centimes, and a linen pocket-handkerchief of good quality, but unmarked.

And nothing more!

The commissioner was regretting this, when, on carefully examining the pocket-book, he found a compartment which had at first escaped his notice on account of being hid under a leather flap.

In this compartment was a carefully folded paper. He unfolded it and read the contents aloud:

"My Dear Gustave—To-morrow, Sunday evening, do not fail to come to the ball at the Rainbow, according to our agreement. If you have no money, pass my house, and I will leave some with the *concièrge,* who will give it to you.

"Be there at eight o'clock. If I am not already there, it will not be long before I make my appearance. All is well.

"Lacheneur."

Alas! what did this letter reveal? Only that the dead man's name was Gustave; that he had some connection with a man named Lacheneur, who had advanced him money for a certain object; and that they had met at the Rainbow some hours before the murder.

It was little—very little. It was something, however. It was a clew; and in this absolute darkness even the faintest gleam of light was eagerly welcomed.

"Lacheneur!" growled Gevrol; "the poor devil uttered that name in his last agony."

"Precisely," insisted Father Absinthe; "and he declared that he wished to revenge himself upon him. He accused him of having drawn him into a trap. Unfortunately, death cut his story short."

Lecoq was silent. The commissioner of police had handed him the letter, and he was studying it with the closest attention.

The paper was of the ordinary kind; the ink was blue. In one of the corners was a half-effaced mark, upon which one could distinguish only the name: Beaumarchais.

This was enough for Lecoq.

"This letter," he thought, "was certainly written in

a *café* on the Boulevard Beaumarchais. In which one? I will find out, for this Lacheneur must be found."

While the men of the prefecture were gathered around the commissioner, holding council and deliberating, the physicians began their delicate and disagreeable task.

With the assistance of the obliging Father Absinthe, they removed the clothing of the pretended soldier, and, bending over their "subject" like surgeons in the schools of anatomy, with sleeves rolled up, they examined, inspected, and appraised him physically.

Very willingly would the artist-doctor have dispensed with these formalities, which he considered very ridiculous, and entirely unnecessary; but the old physician had too high a regard for his profession, and for the duty he had been called upon to fulfil, to neglect the slightest detail.

Minutely, and with the most scrupulous exactitude, he noted the height of the dead man, his supposed age, the nature of his temperament, the color and the length of his hair, and the degree of development of his muscular system.

Then they passed to an examination of the wound.

Lecoq had judged correctly. The doctors declared it a fracture of the base of the skull. It could, they stated in their report, have been caused only by the action of some instrument with a very broad surface, or by a violent knock of the head against some hard substance of considerable magnitude.

But no weapon, other than the revolver, had been found; and that was not heavy enough to produce such a wound.

There must, then, necessarily, have been a hand-to-hand struggle between the pretended soldier and the

murderer; and the latter, seizing his adversary by the throat, had dashed him violently against the wall.

The presence of very tiny and very numerous spots of extravasated blood about the neck made these conclusions extremely plausible.

They did not find any other wound, not a bruise, not a scratch—nothing!

Hence, it was evident that this terrible struggle must have been exceedingly short.

Between the moment when the squad of police had heard the shrieks and the moment when Lecoq had peered through the shutter and seen the victim fall, this slaughter must have been consummated.

The examination of the other murdered men required different, but even greater, precautions.

Their position had been respected; they were still lying across the hearth as they had fallen, and their attitude was a matter of great importance, since it would have an important bearing on the case.

And this attitude was such that one could not fail to be impressed with the idea that their death had been instantaneous.

Both of them were stretched out upon their backs, their limbs extended and their hands wide open.

No contraction, no torsion of the muscles, no trace of combat, they had been taken unawares.

The faces of both men expressed the most intense fear. One might suppose, if he believed the theory of Devergie, that the last sentiment they had experienced in life had been neither anger nor hatred, but terror.

"Thus," said the old doctor, "we may reasonably suppose that they must have been stupefied by some entirely unexpected, strange, and frightful spectacle. This terrified expression, written upon their faces, I

have noticed more than once upon the features of a woman who suddenly died from the shock she experienced in seeing one of her neighbors enter her house to play a trick upon her, disguised as a phantom."

Lecoq drank in these explanations given by the physicians, and tried to make them conform to the vague hypotheses that were revolving in his own brain.

But who could these individuals be? Would they in death guard the secret of their identity, as the other victim had done?

The first subject examined by the physicians was over fifty years of age. His hair was very thin and quite gray; his face was closely shaven, except for a thick tuft of hair that decorated his rather prominent chin.

He was very poorly clad in pantaloons that hung in rags over boots which were trodden down at the heel, and in a much soiled woollen blouse.

The old doctor declared that this man must have been instantly killed by a bullet; the size of the circular wound, the absence of blood around its edge, and the blackened and burnt flesh demonstrated this fact with almost mathematical precision.

The great difference in the wounds made by firearms, according to the distance from which the death-dealing missile comes, was seen when the physicians began the autopsy of the last of the unfortunates.

The ball that had caused his death had scarcely traversed a yard of space before it reached him, and his wound was not nearly so hideous in aspect as the other.

This individual, who was at least fifteen years younger than his companion, was small and remarkably ugly.

His entirely beardless face was everywhere scarred by the smallpox.

His garb was such as is worn by the worst denizens of the *barrière*. His trousers were of gray checked material, and his blouse was turned back *en revers* at the throat. His boots had been blackened. The little glazed cap that lay on the floor beside him was in harmony with his pretentious coiffure and his gaudy cravat.

But these were all the facts that the physician's report set forth in technical terms; this was all the information that had been obtained by the most careful investigation.

Vainly the pockets of the two men had been explored and turned inside out; they contained nothing that would give the slightest clew to their personality, to their name, to their social position, or to their profession.

Not even the slightest indication—not a letter, not an address, not a fragment of paper; nothing—not even the common articles of personal use, such as a tobacco-box, a knife, a pipe which might be recognized, and thus establish the identity of its owner.

Some tobacco in a paper bag, some pocket-handkerchiefs that were unmarked, some rolls of cigarettes—these were all that had been discovered.

The elder man had sixty-seven francs about him; the younger, two louis.

Rarely had the police found themselves in the presence of so terrible an affair, without some slight clew to guide them.

With the exception of the fact itself, proved only too well by the bodies of the three victims, they were ignorant of everything connected with it, of the circum-

stances and of the motive, and the probabilities, instead of dissipating the uncertainty, only augmented it.

Certainly they might hope, by the aid of time, strenuous effort, and the powerful means of investigation which they have at their disposal, to finally arrive at the truth.

But, meanwhile, all was mystery—so much so that they could not even say who was to blame.

The murderer had been arrested; but, if he persisted in his obstinacy, how were they to ascertain his name? He protested his innocence; how were they to furnish any proofs of his guilt?

They knew nothing in regard to the victims; and one of them had with his dying breath accused himself.

An inexplicable influence tied the tongue of the Widow Chupin.

Two women, one of whom had lost an ear-ring valued at five thousand francs, had witnessed the struggle—then disappeared. An accomplice, after two acts of unheard-of audacity, had made his escape.

And all these people—the women, the murderer, the keeper of the saloon, the accomplice, and the victims—were equally strange and mysterious, equally suspected of *not* being what they seemed to be.

Perhaps the commissioner thought he would spend a very unpleasant quarter of an hour at the prefecture when he reported the case. Certainly he spoke of his impressions on the subject in a very despondent tone.

"It will now be best," he said at last, "to transport these three bodies to the morgue. There they will doubtless be identified."

He reflected a moment, then added:

"And to think that one of these dead men is perhaps Lacheneur himself!"

"That is scarcely possible," said Lecoq. "The disguised soldier, being the last to die, had seen his companions fall. If he had supposed Lacheneur dead, he would not have spoken of vengeance."

Gevrol, who for the past two hours had pretended to pay no attention to the proceedings, now approached. He was not the man to yield even to the strongest evidence.

"If Monsieur le Commissaire will listen to me, he shall hear my opinion, which is a trifle more definite than Monsieur Lecoq's fancies."

The sound of wheels before the door of the cabin interrupted him, and an instant after the judge of instruction* entered the room.

CHAPTER X

There was not a person in the Poivrière who did not know, at least by sight, the judge who had just entered, and Gevrol, an old habitué of the Palais de Justice, murmured his name:

"Monsieur Maurice d'Escorval."

He was the son of that famous Baron d'Escorval, who, in 1815, sealed his devotion to the empire with his blood, and upon whom Napoleon, at St. Helena, pronounced this magnificent eulogium:

"Men as honest as he may, I believe, exist; but more honest, no, it is not possible."

Having entered upon his duties as magistrate early

* In French law, the term "instruction" is applied to the investigation and preparation of a case for trial.

And the judge of instruction is the official charged with collecting proofs and testimony, and in preparing the case for presentation to the court.

in life, and being endowed with a remarkable talent for his vocation, it had been supposed that he would rise to the most exalted rank in his profession. But he had disappointed such prognostications by resolutely refusing all the more elevated positions that men offered to him, in order to continue his modest but useful functions in the tribunal of the Seine.

To explain his refusals, he said that life in Paris had more charms for him than the most enviable advancement. But it was hard to understand this declaration on his part, for in spite of his brilliant connections and large fortune, he had, since the death of his eldest brother, led a most retired existence, concealing his life, or revealing it only by his untiring labors and the good he did to those around him.

He was now about forty-two years of age, but appeared much younger, although furrows were beginning to show themselves upon his forehead.

One would have admired his face, had it not been for the puzzling immobility that marred its beauty, the sarcastic curl of the thin lips, and the gloomy expression of his pale-blue eyes.

To say that he was cold and grave did not express the truth; it was saying too little. He was gravity and coldness personified, with a shade of hauteur added.

Impressed by the horror of the scene the instant he placed his foot upon the threshold, M. d'Escorval acknowledged the presence of the physicians and the commissioner only by an abstracted nod of the head. The others in the room had no existence so far as he was concerned.

Already his faculties were at work. He studied the ground, and carefully noted all the surroundings with the attentive sagacity of a judge who realizes the im-

mense weight of even the slightest detail, and who understands the eloquence of circumstantial evidence.

"It is a serious affair," he said, gravely; "very serious."

The commissioner's only response was to lift his eyes to heaven. A gesture that said very plainly:

"I am quite in accord with you!"

The fact is, that for the past two hours the worthy commissioner's responsibility had weighed heavily upon him, and he secretly blessed the judge for relieving him of it.

"The government solicitor was unable to accompany me," resumed M. d'Escorval; "he has not the gift of omnipresence, and I doubt if it is possible for him to join me here. Let us, therefore, begin operations at once."

The curiosity of those present was becoming unendurable; and the commissioner only expressed the general feeling when he said:

"You, sir, have undoubtedly questioned the murderer, and have learned——"

"I have learned nothing," interrupted M. d'Escorval, apparently much astonished at the interruption.

He seated himself, and while his clerk was busy in authenticating the commissioner's *procès-verbal,* he began the perusal of the report written by Lecoq.

Pale, agitated, and nervous, that young policeman, hidden in a remote corner, tried to read upon the impassive face of the magistrate the impression produced by the document.

It was his future that was at stake—that depended upon this man's approval or disapproval.

It was not with a stupid mind like that of Father Ab-

sinthe that he had to deal now, but with a superior intelligence.

"If I could only plead my own cause," he thought. "What are cold written phrases in comparison with spoken, living words, palpitating with emotion and with the convictions of the soul that utters them?"

But he was soon reassured.

The face of the judge retained its immobility, but he nodded his head in token of approval, and occasionally some point more ingenious than the others extorted from his lips the exclamation: "Not bad! very good!"

When he had finished its perusal:

"All this," he remarked to the commissioner, "is quite unlike your report of this morning, which represented this mysterious affair as a low broil between some miserable vagabonds."

This observation was only too just; and the commissioner deeply regretted that he had trusted to the representations of Gevrol, and remained warm in bed.

"This morning," he responded, evasively, "I only gave my first impressions. These have been modified by subsequent researches, so that——"

"Oh!" interrupted the judge, "I did not intend to reproach you; on the contrary, I must congratulate you. One could not have done better nor acted more promptly. All this *instruction* shows great penetration and research, and the results are given with unusual clearness and wonderful precision."

Lecoq's head whirled.

The commissioner hesitated for an instant.

He was sorely tempted to confiscate this praise to his own profit.

If he drove away the unworthy thought, it was be-

cause he was an honest man; and more than that, because it did not displease him to have an opportunity to do Gevrol a bad turn and punish him for his presumptuous folly.

"I must confess," he said, with some hesitation, "that the honor of this investigation does not belong to me."

"To whom, then, shall I attribute it, if not to the inspector?" thought M. d'Escorval, nor without surprise; for having occasionally employed Gevrol, he did not expect from him such ingenuity and sagacity as was displayed in this report.

"Is it you, then, who have conducted this investigation so ably?" he demanded.

"Upon my word, no!" responded Inspector Gevrol. "I, myself, am not so clever as all that. I content myself with telling only what I discover; and I say: 'Here it is!' May I be hung if the grounds of this report exist, except in the brain of the man who has made it."

Perhaps he really believed his assertion, being one of those persons who are blinded by vanity to such a degree that, with the most convincing evidence before their eyes, they deny it.

"Yet," insisted the judge, "these women whose footprints were left here have existed. The accomplice who left the bits of wool upon the plank is a real being. This ear-ring is a positive, palpable proof."

Gevrol had hard work to refrain from shrugging his shoulders.

"All this can be satisfactorily explained without a search of twelve or fourteen hours. That the murderer had an accomplice is possible. The presence of the women is very natural. Wherever there are men

thieves, you will find women thieves. As for the diamond—what does that prove? That the scoundrels had just met with a streak of good luck, that they had come here to divide their booty, and that the quarrel arose from the division."

This was an explanation, and such a plausible one, that M. d'Escorval was silent, reflecting before he announced his decision.

"Decidedly," he declared, at last, "decidedly, I adopt the hypothesis set forth in the report. Who is the author of it?"

Anger made Gevrol's face as red as a lobster.

"The author is one of my men," he replied; "a very clever and adroit man—Monsieur Lecoq. Come forward, Lecoq, that the judge may see you."

The young man advanced, his lips tightly compressed to conceal a smile of satisfaction.

"My report is only a summary, Monsieur," he began; "but I have certain ideas——"

"Which you will tell me when I ask for them," interrupted the judge.

And oblivious of Lecoq's chagrin, he took from the portfolio of his clerk two forms, which he filled up and handed to Gevrol, saying:

"Here are two orders; take them to the station-house, where the accused and the mistress of this cabin are confined, and have them conducted to the perfecture, where they will be privately examined."

When he had given these directions, M. d'Escorval was turning toward the physicians, when Lecoq, at the risk of a second rebuff, interposed.

"May I venture," he asked, "to beg Monsieur to confide this mission to me?"

"Impossible; I may have need of you here."

"I desired, Monsieur, to collect certain evidence, and an opportunity to do so may not present itself again."

The judge, perhaps, fathomed the young man's motive.

"So be it," he replied; "but after your task is completed you will await me at the prefecture, where I shall go as soon as I have finished here. Go."

Lecoq did not wait for him to repeat the order. He snatched up the papers and hastened away.

He did not run; he flew over the ground. He no longer experienced any fatigue from the labors of the preceding night. Never had he felt so strong and alert in body, so strong and clear in mind.

He was hopeful of success. He had confidence in himself, and he would have been perfectly happy if he could have had another judge to deal with. But M. d'Escorval overawed and froze him to such a degree that his mind seemed absolutely paralyzed in his presence. With what a disdainful glance he had surveyed him! With what an imperious tone he had imposed silence upon him—and that, too, when he had found his work deserving of commendation.

"But nonsense!" he mentally exclaimed; "does one ever taste perfect happiness here below?"

And he hurried on.

CHAPTER XI

When, after a rapid walk of twenty minutes, Lecoq reached the police-station of the Barrière d'Italie, the keeper, with his pipe in his mouth, was pacing slowly to and fro before the guard-house.

By his thoughtful air, and by the anxious glance that he cast now and then upon the little grated window,

any passer-by might have known that the keeper had at that moment a very rare bird in his cage.

As soon as he recognized Lecoq, his brow cleared, and he paused in his promenade.

"Ah, well!" he inquired; "what news?"

"I bring an order to conduct the prisoners to the prefecture."

The keeper rubbed his hands, evidently relieved.

"Very well! very well!" he exclaimed. "The Black Maria will pass here in less than an hour; we will throw them in, and hurry the coachman off——"

Lecoq was obliged to interrupt his transports of satisfaction.

"Are the prisoners alone?" he inquired.

"Entirely alone; the woman on her side of the hall, the man on the other. This has been a remarkably quiet night; a shrove Sunday night, too! It is surprising. It is true that your hunt was interrupted."

"You have had a drunken man here, however."

"No—yes—that is a fact—this morning, just at daybreak. A poor devil, who is under a great obligation to Gevrol."

The involuntary irony of this remark must have awakened Lecoq's regrets.

"Under a great obligation, indeed!" said he, approvingly, and with a laugh.

"Although you seem inclined to laugh, such is really the case; had it not been for Gevrol the man would certainly have been run over."

"And what has become of him?"

The keeper shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah!" he responded. "You ask me too much. He was a very worthy man, who had been spending the night at the house of one of his friends, and on coming

out into the air, the wine flew to his head. He told us all about it when he became sober, which was in the course of half an hour. I have never seen a man so vexed. He wept and said, again and again: "The father of a family, and at my age! Oh! it is shameful! What shall I say to my wife? What will the children think?"

"Did he talk much about his wife?"

"He talked about nothing else. He even mentioned her name—Eudosia, Leocadie, or some name of that sort. He thought, poor man, that he was ruined, and that we would keep him here. He asked us to send for the commissioner, to go to his house. When we set him free, I thought he would go mad with joy; he kissed our hands, and he paid his score. Ah! he did not even stop to ask for his change!"

"And did you place him in the cage with the murderer?" inquired Lecoq.

"Certainly."

"They have talked with each other then."

"Talked! The man was so drunk, I tell you, that he could not have said 'bread.' When he was deposited in the cell, pouf! he fell like a log. As soon as he recovered we let him out. No, they did not talk to each other."

The young policeman had become very thoughtful.

"It was, indeed, so!" he murmured.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Lecoq was not inclined to communicate his reflections to the keeper of the guard-house. They were by no means agreeable.

"I was right," he thought; "this pretended drunken man was none other than the accomplice, and he has as

much adroitness as he has audacity and coolness. While we were following his footprints he was watching us. We went away and he was bold enough to enter the hovel. Then he came here and compelled them to arrest him; and thanks to an assumption of childish simplicity, he succeeded in finding an opportunity to speak to the murderer. How perfectly he has played his *rôle*. But I know that he played a part, and that is something. I know that it will be necessary to believe exactly the opposite of what he said. He talked of his family, of his wife, of his children—hence, he has neither children, wife, nor family."

He checked himself suddenly; he had forgotten, this was not the time to become absorbed in conjectures.

"What kind of a looking man was this drunkard?" he inquired.

"He was tall and very large, had a ruddy complexion, white whiskers, a full face, small eyes, a broad, flat nose, and a good-natured, jovial manner."

"How old would you suppose him to be?"

"From forty to fifty years of age."

"Did you form any idea of his profession?"

"*Ma foi!* the man with his soft cap and his heavy brown overcoat must be the keeper of some little shop, or a clerk."

Having obtained this sufficiently exact description, which accorded perfectly with the result of his investigations, Lecoq was about to enter the station-house when a sudden thought brought him instantly to a stand-still.

"I hope, at least, that this man has had no communication with the Widow Chupin!"

The keeper laughed heartily.

"How could he have had any?" he responded. "Is

not the old woman alone in her cell? Ah, the old wretch! There has not been a moment that she was not cursing and threatening us. No, never in my whole life have I heard such language as she has used! It was enough to make the very stones blush; even the drunken man was so shocked that he went to speak to her through the opening in the door, and to tell her to be quiet."

The young man's gesture was so expressive of impatience and wrath that the keeper paused, much perturbed.

"What is the matter?" he stammered. "Why are you angry?"

"Because," replied Lecoq, furiously, "because——"

And not wishing to disclose the real cause of his anger, he entered the station-house, saying that he wished to see the prisoner.

Left alone, the keeper began to swear in his turn.

"These agents of police are all alike," he grumbled. "They question you, you tell them all they desire to know; and afterward, if you venture to ask them anything, they reply: 'nothing,' or 'because.' They have too much authority; it makes them proud."

Looking through the judas, a little latticed window in the door, through which the men on guard watch the prisoners, Lecoq eagerly examined the appearance of the murderer.

He was obliged to ask himself if this was really the same man whom he had seen some hours previous at the Poivrière, standing upon the threshold, holding the squad in check by the intense fury of his hate, by his proud forehead, his sparkling eyes, and his trembling lip.

Now his whole person betrayed a pitiable weakness, utter despondency, gloom and despair.

He was seated on a bench opposite the judas, with his elbows on his knees, and his chin resting upon his hand, his eyes fixed upon vacancy, his lower lip hanging.

"No," murmured Lecoq, "no, this man is not what he seems to be."

He had looked at him; he now wished to speak to him. He entered; the man raised his head, threw an expressionless glance upon him, but did not say a word.

"Well," demanded the young officer, "how goes it?"

"I am innocent!" responded the man, in a hoarse, discordant voice.

"I hope so, I am sure; but that is for the judge to decide. I came to see if you did not need something."

"No."

A second later the murderer changed his mind.

"If it is all the same to you, I would like a crust and a drink of wine."

"They shall bring it to you," replied Lecoq.

He went out immediately to forage in the neighborhood for eatables of some sort. He was impressed with the idea that in demanding a drink after a refusal, the man had thought only of carrying out his resemblance to the kind of man he pretended to be.

Whoever he might be, the murderer ate with an excellent appetite. He then took up the large glass of wine, drained it slowly, and said:

"It is good! There can be nothing to beat that!"

This satisfaction disappointed Lecoq. He had selected, as a test, one of those horribly thick, bluish, nauseous mixtures which are in vogue around the

barrière, and he expected some sign of dislike from the murderer.

And there was none whatever. But he had not time to seek the conclusions to be drawn from this fact. The sound of wheels announced the arrival of that lugubrious vehicle, the Black Maria.

It was necessary to place the Widow Chupin in the vehicle by main force. She fought and scratched and cried "Murder!" with all her strength. Then the assassin was requested to take his place in the carriage.

Now, at least, the young policeman counted upon some manifestation of repugnance, and he watched the prisoner closely. None! The man entered the frightful vehicle in the most unconcerned manner, and took possession of his compartment like an old habitué, who knows the most comfortable position to assume in such close quarters.

"Ah! this is an unfortunate morning," murmured Lecoq, much disappointed; "but I will lie in wait for him at the prefecture."

CHAPTER XII

When the door of the prison-van had been securely closed, the driver cracked his whip, and the strong horses started off on a brisk trot.

Lecoq had taken his seat in front, between the driver and the guard; but his mind was so engrossed with his own thoughts that he heard nothing of their conversation, which was very jovial, although it was frequently disturbed by the shrill voice of the Widow Chupin, who sang and yelled her imprecations alternately.

Lecoq was trying his best to discover a method by which he could surprise some clew to the secret which

this murderer hid so cleverly, for he was still convinced that the prisoner must belong to the higher ranks of society.

That this pretender had succeeded in feigning an appetite, that he had concealed his distaste for a nauseous beverage, that he had entered the Black Maria without hesitation, was nothing extraordinary after all, in a man who was endowed with much strength of will, when he realized the imminence of his peril, and when his powers of endurance were increased tenfold by the hope of salvation.

But would he be able to hide his feelings as well when he was obliged to submit to the humiliating formalities that awaited him—formalities which, in certain cases, can, and must be, pushed even to the verge of insult and outrage?

No; Lecoq could not believe that this would be possible.

He was very sure that the horror that would be inspired in the prisoner's mind by the disgrace, and by the violation of all delicacy of feeling, would cause the man to revolt, to lose his self-control, and draw from him some word that would give the desired clew.

It was not until the gloomy vehicle had left the Pont-Neur to take the Quai de l'Horloge, that the young detective became conscious of what was passing around him. Soon the van turned into a gate-way, and stopped in a small, damp court-yard.

Lecoq was instantly on the ground. He opened the door of the compartment in which the murderer was confined, and said:

"We are here; descend."

There was no danger that the prisoner would escape. The iron gate had been closed, and at least a dozen po-

licemen and agents were standing near, anxious to see the harvest of the previous night.

When the door was opened, the murderer slowly stepped down from the vehicle.

His expression did not change in the least. His face evinced the perfect indifference of a man accustomed to such ordeals.

An anatomist studying the movement of a muscle could not have watched with a closer attention than Lecoq bestowed upon the attitude, the face, and the aspect of the prisoner.

When the prisoner's foot touched the pavement of the court-yard, he seemed to experience a sensation of satisfaction; he drew a long breath, then he stretched himself, and shook himself violently, as if to regain the elasticity of his limbs, cramped by confinement in the narrow compartment from which he had just emerged.

Then he glanced about him, and a scarcely perceptible smile played upon his lips.

One would have sworn that the place was familiar to him, that he had seen before these high, grim walls, these grated windows, these heavy doors—in short, all the sinister belongings of a prison.

"*Mon Dieu!*" thought Lecoq, greatly chagrined, "does he indeed recognize the place?"

The young man's disquietude increased when he saw the prisoner, without waiting for a word, for a motion, for a sign, turn toward one of the five or six doors that opened upon the court-yard.

He walked straight to the one he was expected to enter—straight, without an instant's hesitation. Was it chance?

His amazement and disappointment increased tenfold when he saw the man, after entering the gloomy corri-

dor, walk on some little distance, turn to the left, pass the room of the keeper, and enter the register's office.

An old offender could not have done better.

Lecoq found a cold sweat break out upon his whole body.

"This man," thought he, "has certainly been here before; he knows the ropes."

The register's office was a large room, badly lighted by small windows, whose panes were covered with a thick coating of dust, and heated almost to suffocation by an immense stove.

There sat the clerk reading a paper that was laid over the register—the gloomy register in which are inscribed the names of all those whom misconduct, crime, misfortune, madness, or error have brought to these grim portals.

Three or four watchmen, who were awaiting the hour for entering upon their duties, were half asleep upon the wooden benches that lined three sides of the room.

These benches, two tables, and some broken chairs, constituted the furniture of the office.

In one corner stood a measuring machine, under which each culprit was obliged to pass. For their exact height was recorded, in order that the description might be complete in every respect.

At the entrance of the culprit accompanied by Lecoq, the clerk raised his head.

"Ah!" said he, "has the van come?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq.

And extending the orders signed by M. d'Escorval, he added:

"Here are the papers for this man."

The register took the documents and read them.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "a triple assassination! oh! oh!"

Positively he regarded the prisoner with great consideration. This was not a common culprit, an ordinary vagabond, a vulgar thief.

"The judge orders a private examination," he continued, "and I must get him other clothing. The clothing he is wearing now will be used as evidence. Let someone go at once and tell the superintendent that the other occupants of the carriage must wait. I will measure this man's height in compliance with the rules."

The director was not far off, and he soon made his appearance. The clerk had prepared his register.

"Your name?" he demanded first.

"May."

"Your first name?"

"I have none."

"What, you have no Christian name?"

The murderer seemed to reflect for a moment, then he said, sulkily:

"I may as well tell you that you need not wear yourself out questioning me. I shall reply only to the judge. You would like to make me cut my own throat, wouldn't you? It is a very clever trick, but I understand it."

"You must see that you only aggravate your situation," observed the director.

"Not in the least. I am innocent; you wish to ruin me. I only defend myself. Get anything more out of me now, if you can. But you had better give me back the money that they took from me at the station-house. One hundred and thirty-six francs, eight sous! I shall need them when I get out of this place. I wish you to

make a note of them on the register. Where are they?"

The money had been given to Lecoq by the keeper of the station-house, who had found it upon the prisoner when he was placed in his custody. Lecoq deposited it upon the table.

"Here are your hundred and thirty-six francs and eight sous," said he, "and also your knife, your handkerchief, and four cigars."

An expression of lively contentment was discernible on the prisoner's features.

"Now," resumed the clerk, "will you answer?"

But the director understood the uselessness of further insistence; he silenced the clerk by a gesture, and, addressing the prisoner, he said:

"Take off your shoes."

On receiving this order, Lecoq thought the assassin's glance wavered. Was it only a fancy?

"Why must I do that?" he demanded.

"To pass under the beam," responded the clerk. "We must make a note of your exact height."

The prisoner made no reply; he sat down and drew off his heavy leather boots. The heel of the right one was run over on the inside. He wore no stockings.

"You do not wear shoes except on Sunday, then?" inquired Lecoq.

"Why do you think that?"

"By the mud with which your feet are covered, as high as the ankle-bone."

"And what of that?" exclaimed the man, in an insolent tone. "Is it a crime not to have the feet of a marquise?"

"It is a crime of which you are not guilty, at all events," said the young detective, slowly. "Do you

think that I cannot see, in spite of the mud, that your feet are white and neat? The nails have been carefully cut and polished——"

He paused. A lightning flash of his genius for investigation traversed his brain.

He pushed forward a chair, laid a paper upon it, and said:

"Will you place your foot there?"

The man did not comply with the request.

"Ah! do not resist," insisted the director; "we are in force."

The prisoner made no further resistance. He placed his foot upon the chair, as he had been ordered to do, and Lecoq, with the aid of a knife, proceeded to remove the fragments of mud that adhered to the skin.

Anywhere else, they would have laughed at such an act, so mysterious, strange and grotesque, all at the same time. But in this ante-chamber of the court of assizes, the most trivial acts are tinged with a shade of gloom; a laugh is easily frozen upon the lips, and one is astonished by nothing.

All the spectators, from the director down to the guards, had witnessed many other incidents equally absurd; and it did not enter the mind of anyone present to inquire the detective's motive.

This much they knew already: that the prisoner was intending to conceal his identity, that it was necessary to establish it, at any cost, and that Lecoq had probably invented some method of attaining this end.

Besides, the operation was soon concluded; and Lecoq brushed the dust from the paper into the palm of his hand.

This dust he divided into two parts. One portion he enclosed in a scrap of paper, and then slipped it into

his own pocket; the other package he handed to the director, saying, as he did so:

"I must beg you, Monsieur, to receive this on deposit, and to seal it up here, in the presence of the prisoner. This is necessary, that he may not claim by-and-by that in place of this dust other has been substituted."

The superintendent complied with the request, and as he placed this "bit of proof" (as he styled it) in a small satchel for safe-keeping, the murderer shrugged his shoulders with a sneering laugh.

It is true that beneath this cynical gayety Lecoq thought he could detect poignant anxiety.

Chance owed him the compensation of this slight triumph; for previous events had deceived all his calculations.

The prisoner did not offer the slightest objection when he was ordered to undress, and to exchange his soiled and blood-stained garments for the clothing furnished by the government.

Not a muscle of his face betrayed the secret of his soul, while he submitted his person to one of those ignominious examinations which make the blood mount to the forehead of the lowest criminal.

It was with perfect indifference that he allowed the inspector to comb his hair and his beard, and to examine the interior of his mouth, in order to make sure that he had not concealed in one of these hiding-places a fragment of glass, by the aid of which captives can sever the strongest bars; or one of those microscopic bits of lead that prisoners use in writing the notes which they exchange, rolled up in a morsel of bread, and which they call "postilions."

These formalities having been concluded, the superintendent rang for one of the guard.

"Conduct this man to No. 3 of the secret cells," he ordered.

There was no need to drag the prisoner away. He went out, as he had entered, preceding the guard, like an old *habitue*, who knows where he is going.

"What a rascal!" exclaimed the clerk.

"Then you think—" began Lecoq, baffled, but not convinced.

"Ah! there can be no doubt of it," declared the director. "This man is certainly a dangerous malefactor—an old offender—I think I have seen him before—I could almost swear to it."

So these people, who had such a large and varied experience, shared Gevrol's opinion; Lecoq stood alone.

He did not discuss the matter—what good would it have done? Besides, they were just bringing in the Widow Chupin.

The journey must have calmed her nerves, for she had become as gentle as a lamb. It was in a wheedling voice, and with tearful eyes, that she called upon these "good gentlemen" to witness the shameful injustice with which she was treated—she, an honest woman. She was the support of the family (since her son Polyte was in custody, charged with pocket-picking), and what would become of her daughter-in-law, and her grandson Toto, who had no one to look to but her?

But when they were leading her away, after she had given her full name, she no sooner entered the corridor than nature reasserted itself, and they heard her quarrelling with the guard.

"You are wrong not to be polite," she was saying to him; "you are losing a good fee, without counting many a good drink that I would give you without charge, when I get out of here."

The examinations were over, and Lecoq was free until the arrival of M. d'Escorval. He wandered through the corridors, and from room to room; but, as he was questioned on every side, he went out and sat down upon the quay to collect his thoughts.

His convictions were unchanged. He was still more convinced that the prisoner was concealing his real social condition; but, on the other hand, it was evident that the man was well acquainted with the prison and with its usages.

He had also proved himself to be much more clever —a thousand times more clever—than Lecoq had supposed.

What self-control! What powers of dissimulation! He had not so much as frowned while undergoing the severest ordeals, and he had deceived the most experienced eyes in Paris.

The young detective had been waiting there nearly three hours, as motionless as the post upon which he was seated, and alike insensible to the cold and to the flight of time, when a *coupé* drew up before the entrance of the prison, and M. d'Escorval descended, followed by his clerk.

Lecoq rose and hastened toward them, breathless with anxiety.

"My researches on the spot," said the judge, "confirm me in my belief that you are right. Is there anything new?"

"Yes, Monsieur; a fact apparently very trivial, but of an importance that——"

"Very well!" interrupted the judge. "You will explain this to me by and by. I wish first to make a summary examination of the accused parties. A mere matter of form to-day. Wait for me here."

Although the judge promised to make haste, Lecoq expected that at least an hour would elapse before he reappeared. But he was wrong. Twenty minutes had not passed before M. d'Escorval emerged from the prison without his clerk.

He walked very quickly, and calling to the young detective from some little distance, he said:

"I must return home at once—instantly; I cannot listen to you."

"But, Monsieur——"

"Enough! the bodies of the victims have been taken to the morgue. Keep a sharp lookout there. Then, this evening make— Well—do whatever you think best."

"But, Monsieur, I must——"

"To-morrow! to-morrow at nine o'clock, in my office in the Palais de Justice."

Lecoq wished to insist upon a hearing, but M. d'Escorval had entered, or rather had thrown himself, into his *coupé*, and the coachman was cracking his whip.

"And he is a judge!" murmured the young man, left panting upon the quay. "Has he gone mad?"

And an uncharitable thought entered his mind.

"Can it be," he murmured, "that he holds the key to the mystery? Does he not desire to get rid of me?"

This suspicion was so terrible that he hastened back to the prison, hoping to gain some light from the bearing of the prisoner, and ran to peer through the little aperture in the heavy door leading into the cell.

The murderer was lying upon the pallet that stood directly opposite the door. His face was turned toward the wall, and he was enveloped to the very eyes in the coverlid.

Was he asleep? No; for Lecoq detected a strange

movement of the body. This movement, which he could not explain, annoyed him. He applied his ear instead of his eye to the aperture, and he distinguished a stifled moan. There could no longer be any doubt. The death-rattle was sounding in the prisoner's throat.

"Here! here!" cried Lecoq, greatly excited. "Help! help!"

Ten guards came running at his call.

"The prisoner! he is killing himself!"

They opened the door; it was time.

The poor wretch had torn a binding from his clothing, had tied it around his neck, and using in place of a tourniquet a tin spoon that had been brought in with his allowance of food, he was strangling himself.

The prison doctor, who had been sent for, and who immediately bled the prisoner, declared that in ten minutes all would have been over.

When the murderer regained consciousness, he gazed about his cell with a wild, idiotic stare. One might have supposed that he was amazed to find himself still alive. Then a great tear welled from his swollen eyelids, and rolled down his cheek.

They pressed him with questions—not a word in response.

"Since he is in such a frame of mind, and since we cannot give him a companion, as he has been sentenced to solitary confinement, we must put him in a straitjacket."

After he had assisted in binding the prisoner, Lecoq went away, very thoughtful, and painfully agitated. He felt that this veil of mystery hid some terrible drama.

"But what has occurred?" he murmured. "Has this unfortunate man, who tried to destroy himself, confessed all to the judge? Why should he have committed such an act of desperation?"

CHAPTER XIII

Lecoq did not sleep any that night.

And yet he had been on his feet for more than forty hours, and had scarcely paused to eat or to drink.

But anxiety, hope, and even fatigue itself, imparted to his body the factitious strength of fever, and to his intellect that unhealthy acuteness which is the result of intense mental effort.

He no longer occupied himself in pursuing imaginary deductions, as he had done when in the employ of his patron, the astronomer. Facts were more startling than chimeras. They were only too real—the dead bodies of the three victims that were lying on the marble slab of the morgue.

But if the catastrophe itself was certain, beyond the shadow of a doubt, everything connected with it could only be conjectured. Not a witness could be found to tell what circumstances had preceded and paved the way for this terrible *dénouement*.

One discovery, it is true, would suffice to dissipate these doubts, and that was the identity of the murderer.

Who was he? Which was right?—Gevrol, upheld by all the men at the prison, or Lecoq, who stood alone?

Gevrol's opinion was based upon formidable proof,

the evidence that enters the mind through the sense of sight.

Lecoq's hypothesis was based only upon a series of subtle observations, and of deductions whose starting-point was a single sentence, which had fallen from the lips of the murderer.

And yet Lecoq did not feel the least particle of uncertainty after his short conversation with M. d'Escorval's clerk, whom he met as he was leaving the prison.

This worthy young man, when adroitly interrogated by Lecoq, was easily persuaded to reveal what had passed between the prisoner and the judge.

It was, one might say, nothing at all.

The murderer, so the clerk declared, had not only refused to make any confession to M. d'Escorval, but he had replied in the most evasive manner to all the questions which had been put to him; and in several instances he had not replied at all.

And if the judge had not insisted upon a reply, it was only because this first examination was a mere formality, intended to justify the rather premature delivery of the order to imprison the accused.

Under these circumstances, how was one to explain this act of despair on the part of the prisoner?

The statistics of prisons prove that " habitual offenders " (that is the expression) do not commit suicide.

When detected in a criminal act, some members of this class are seized with a wild frenzy, and have what are styled nervous attacks; others fall into a dull stupor, like a glutted beast who falls asleep with the blood of his victim upon his lips.

But such men never think of putting an end to their days. They hold fast to their life, no matter how seriously they may be compromised. They are cowards.

On the other hand, the unfortunate man who, in a moment of frenzy, commits some crime, not unfrequently seeks to avoid the consequences of his act by a voluntary death.

Hence this abortive attempt on the part of the accused was a strong argument in favor of Lecoq's theory.

This wretched man's secret must be a terrible one, since he holds it dearer than his life; since he has tried to destroy himself that he might take it inviolate to the grave.

Four o'clock sounded.

Quickly Lecoq sprang from the bed, where he had thrown himself down without removing his clothing; and five minutes later he was walking down the Rue Montmartre.

The weather was still disagreeable; the fog had not lifted. But what did it matter to the young detective?

He was walking briskly on, when, just as he reached Saint Eustache, someone in a coarse, mocking voice accosted him with:

"Ah, ha! my fine fellow!"

He looked up and perceived Gevrol, who, accompanied by three of his men, had come to cast his nets near the market. It is a good place. The police seldom fail to find thieves and vagabonds lurking around the establishment kept open during the night by the hucksters.

"You are up very early this morning, Monsieur Lecoq," continued the inspector; "you are still trying to discover our man's identity, I suppose?"

"Still trying."

"Is he a prince in disguise, or only a simple marquis?"

"One or the other, I am quite certain."

"Very well. In that case, you will not refuse to give us an opportunity to drink to your success."

Lecoq consented, and the party entered a saloon near by. When the glasses were filled:

"Upon my word, General," exclaimed Lecoq, "our meeting will save me a long walk. I was intending to go to the prefecture to request you, in behalf of Monsieur d'Escorval, to send one of our comrades to the morgue this morning. The affair at the Poivrière has been noised about, and all the world will be there, and he desires some officer to be present to watch the crowd and listen to the remarks of the visitors."

"Very well; Father Absinthe shall be there at the opening."

To send Father Absinthe where a shrewd and subtle agent was required was a mockery. Still Lecoq made no protest against this decision. It was better to be badly served than to be betrayed; and he could trust Father Absinthe.

"It does not matter much," continued Gevrol; "but you should have informed me of this last evening. But when I reached the prefecture you had gone."

"I had business."

"Yes?"

"At the station-house at the Barrière d'Italie. I wished to know whether the floor of the cage was paved or tiled."

After this response, he paid the score, saluted his superior officer, and went out.

"Thunder!" exclaimed Gevrol, striking his glass violently upon the counter. "Thunder! how that fellow provokes me! He does not know the A B C's of his profession. When he can discover nothing, he in-

vents wonderful stories, and then misleads the judges with his high-sounding phrases, in the hope of winning promotion. I will give him advancement with a vengeance! I will teach him to set himself above me!"

Lecoq had not been deceived. The evening before, he had visited the station-house where the prisoner had first been confined, and had compared the soil of the cell floor with the dust he had in his pocket; and he took away with him, as he believed, one of those crushing proofs that often suffice to extort from the most obstinate criminal a complete confession.

If he was in haste to part company with Gevrol, it was because he was eager to pursue his investigations still further, before appearing in the presence of M. d'Escorval.

He was determined to find the coachman who had been stopped by the two women on the Rue du Chevaleret; and with this object in view, he had obtained at the prefecture the name and address of each person who had carriages for hire, between the road to Fontainebleau and the Seine.

His first efforts at investigation were unfortunate.

In the first establishment which he visited, the stable boys, who were not yet up, swore at him roundly. In the second, he found the grooms at work, but not a coachman had made his appearance.

Moreover, the proprietor of the establishment refused to show him the books upon which are recorded —or should be recorded—the daily engagements of each coachman.

He was beginning to despair, when at about half-past seven o'clock he reached the house of a man named Trigault, whose establishment was just beyond the fortifications. Here he learned that on Sunday night,

or rather early Monday morning, one of the coachmen, as he was returning home for the night, had been accosted by some parties, who succeeded in persuading him to go back to Paris.

This coachman was pointed out to Lecoq; he was then in the court-yard harnessing his horse.

He was a little old man, with a very high color, and small eyes full of cunning. Lecoq walked up to him at once.

"Was it you," he demanded, "who, on Sunday night, or rather on Monday, between one and two o'clock in the morning, took two women from the Rue du Chevaleret to the city?"

The coachman looked up, and, surveying Lecoq attentively, cautiously replied:

"Perhaps."

"It is a positive answer that I want."

"Aha!" said the old man, sneeringly, "Monsieur undoubtedly knows two ladies who have lost something in a carriage, and so——"

The young detective trembled with joy. This man was certainly the one whom he sought; he interrupted him:

"Have you heard anything about a crime that has been committed in the neighborhood?"

"Yes; a murder in a low drinking-saloon."

"Very well! These two women were there; they fled when we entered the saloon. I am trying to find them. I am an agent of the safety-service; here is my card. Can you give me any information?"

The coachman had become very pale.

"Ah! the wretches!" he exclaimed. "I am no longer surprised at the *pourboire* they gave me. A louis, and two one hundred sou pieces for the fare—

thirty francs in all. Cursed money! if I had not spent it, I would throw it away!"

"And where did you carry them?"

"To the Rue de Bourgogne. I have forgotten the number, but I should recognize the house."

"Unfortunately they would not have you leave them at their own door."

"Who knows? I saw them ring; they pulled the bell, and I think they entered just as I drove away. Shall I take you there?"

Lecoq's sole response was to spring upon the driver's seat, exclaiming:

"Let us be off."

CHAPTER XIV

Was one to suppose that the women who escaped from the Widow Chupin's saloon at the moment of the murder were utterly devoid of intelligence?

No!

Was it possible that these two fugitives, conscious as they were of their perilous situation, would have gone to their real home in a carriage hired on the public highway?

No, again.

Then the hope of finding them manifested by the coachman was chimerical.

Lecoq felt this, and yet he had not hesitated an instant before leaping upon the seat, and giving the signal to depart.

By doing this, he obeyed a maxim which he had fabricated in his hours of meditation, a maxim which was to assure his fame in after days, and which reads as follows:

"In the matter of information, above all, regard with

suspicion that which seems probable. Begin always by believing what seems incredible."

While arriving at these conclusions, the young detective was ingratiating himself into the good graces of the coachman, thereby winning all the information that this worthy had it in his power to bestow.

It was also a way that Lecoq had devised to get back to the heart of Paris more quickly.

He was not deceived in this last calculation.

The horse pricked up his ears and quickened his pace when his master cried: "Hi, there, Cocotle!" in tones that the poor beast knew would admit of no trifling.

In less than no time the carriage reached the Route de Choisy, and then Lecoq resumed his inquiries.

"Well, my good man," he began, "you have told me the principal facts, now I would like the details. How did these two women attract your attention?"

"It was all very simple. I had been having a most unfortunate day—six hours standing in line upon the boulevards, the rain pouring down all the time. What misery! At midnight I had gained only thirty sous of *pourboire*, all told. Still I was so chilled through, and my horse was so tired, that I decided to return. I was grumbling not a little, as you may suppose! After passing the corner of the Rue Picard, on the Rue du Chevaleret, I saw two women standing under a street-lamp, some distance from me. Naturally, I did not pay any attention to them; for when a man is as old as I am, women——"

"Go on!" said Lecoq, who could not restrain his impatience.

"I had passed them, when they began to call: 'Coachman! coachman!' I pretended I did not hear them; but one of them ran after me, crying: 'A louis!

a louis for *pourboire!*' I deliberated for a moment, when, as if to conquer my hesitancy, the woman added: 'And ten francs for fare!' Of course, I stopped at once."

Lecoq was boiling over with impatience, but he felt that direct and hurried questions would be useless. The wisest course was to listen to all the man had to say.

"As you may suppose," continued the coachman, "one is not inclined to trust two such suspicious characters, alone at that hour, in that part of the city. So when they were about to enter the carriage, I cried: 'Halt there! my little friends, you have promised papa some sous; where are they?' The one who had called me at once handed me thirty francs, saying: 'Above all, make haste!'"

"It would be impossible to be more exact," said the young man, approvingly. "Now, how about these two women?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what kind of people did they seem to be; for what would you have taken them?"

The man's red face expanded under the influence of a broad smile.

"Well! I took them to be nothing very good," he replied.

"Ah! and how were they dressed?"

"Like other girls who go to dance at the Rainbow, you know. But one of them was very neat and trig, while the other—well! she was a terrible dowdy."

"Which one ran after you?"

"The neatly dressed girl, the one who——"

He paused suddenly; so vivid was the remembrance that passed through his brain, that he jerked the reins and brought his horse to a stand-still.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed; "now I think of it, I did notice something strange. One of the two women called the other madame, as large as life, while the other said thee and thou, and spoke rather harshly to her companion."

"Oh! oh! oh!" exclaimed the young detective, in three different keys. "And which, if you please, said thou?"

"The shabbily dressed one. She couldn't put two feet in one shoe, that woman couldn't. She shook the other, the trig-looking girl, as if she were a plum-tree. 'Wretch!' said she, 'do you wish to ruin us? You can faint when we get home if you wish; come along!' And the other replied, sobbing: 'Indeed, Madame, indeed I cannot! She really did seem unable to move; in fact, she seemed so ill that I said to myself: 'Here is a young woman who has drank more than a sufficiency.'"

These facts confirmed while they corrected Lecoq's first supposition.

As he had suspected, the social position of the two women was not the same.

He had been mistaken, however, in attributing the pre-eminence to the woman wearing the small shoes with the high heels, whose impressions upon the snow had revealed her weakness.

This pre-eminence belonged to her who had left the prints of the large, broad shoes; and superior in her rank, she had been so in her energy.

Until now Lecoq had been satisfied that she was the servant and the other the mistress.

"Is this all, my good fellow?" he asked his companion.

"All," replied the coachman, "except I noticed that

the shabbily dressed woman who paid me had a hand—well, as small as an infant's; and in spite of her anger, her voice was as sweet as music."

"Did you see her face?"

"I just caught a glimpse of it."

"Could you tell if she were pretty, or whether she was a blonde or a brunette?"

So many questions at a time confused the worthy coachman.

"Stop a minute!" he replied. "In my opinion, she was not pretty, and I do not believe she was young; but she certainly was a blonde, with plenty of hair."

"Was she tall or short; stout or slender?"

"Between the two."

This was very vague.

"And the other," demanded Lecoq, "the neatly dressed one?"

"The devil! As for her, I did not notice her at all; she was very small, that is all I know about her."

"Would you recognize her if you should meet her again?"

"Thunder! no."

The carriage had traversed about half of the Rue de Bourgogne; the coachman stopped his horse and said:

"Attention! That is the house which the two women entered."

To draw off the silk handkerchief that served him as a muffler, to fold it and slip it into his pocket, to spring to the ground and enter the house indicated, was the work of an instant only for the young detective.

In the *concièrge's* little room an old woman was seated knitting.

"Madame," said Lecoq, politely, presenting her with

the silk handkerchief, "I came here to return this article to one of your lodgers."

"To which one?"

"Really, that is something I do not know."

The worthy *concièrge* for a moment supposed that this extremely polite young man was mocking her.

"Villanous wretch!" she began.

"Pardon," interrupted Lecoq; "allow me to finish. This is my explanation: Night before last, or rather day before yesterday morning, about three o'clock, I was quietly returning home, when, not far from here, two ladies, who seemed to be in a great hurry, passed me. One of them dropped this. I picked it up, and, of course, hastened after them to return it; but my labor was lost; they had already entered here. At such an hour I did not like to ring, for fear of disturbing you. Yesterday I was very busy, but to-day I came to return the article; here it is."

He laid the handkerchief upon the table, and pretended that he was about to go, but the *concièrge* detained him.

"Many thanks for your kindness," said she, "but you can keep it. Here, in this house, we have no ladies who return home alone after midnight."

"Still I have eyes," insisted Lecoq, "and I certainly saw——"

"Ah! I had forgotten," exclaimed the old woman. "The night you speak of someone did ring the bell here. I opened my door and listened. I heard nothing. Not hearing anyone close the door or come upstairs, I said to myself: 'It is some mischievous boy playing a trick on me.' I slipped on my dress and went out into the vestibule. What did I see? Two shadowy forms running away; as they ran they slammed the

outer door in my face. I opened it again as quickly as I could, and looked out into the street. What did I see then? Two women hurrying away as fast as they could."

"In what direction?"

"They were running toward the Rue de Varennes."

Lecoq was baffled again; he bowed civilly to the *concièrge*, whom he might have need of again, and went back to the carriage.

"As I had supposed, they do not live here," he remarked to the coachman.

That worthy man shrugged his shoulders in evident vexation; and his wrath was about to find vent in a torrent of words, when Lecoq, who had consulted his watch, checked it by saying:

"Nine o'clock! I shall be an hour behind time, but I shall have some news to tell. Take me to the morgue as quickly as possible."

CHAPTER XV

The days that follow mysterious crimes and catastrophes, whose victims have not been recognized, are great days at the morgue.

The employees hasten about exchanging jests that make one's flesh creep. Almost all of them are very gay. Perhaps it is from an imperious need to arm themselves against the horrible gloom that surrounds them.

"We shall have the world and his wife here to-day," they say.

And, in fact, as soon as Lecoq and his coachman reached the quay, they could see in the distance the

dense and excited crowd which had gathered around that chamber of horrors.

The newspapers had reported the affair that had taken place in the Widow Chupin's saloon, and everybody wished to see the victims.

Upon the bridge Lecoq made the driver stop his horse, and leaped to the ground.

"I do not wish to get out of the carriage before the morgue," he said to the coachman.

Then drawing out, first his watch, and then his purse, he said:

"We have spent one hour and forty minutes, my good fellow, consequently, I owe you——"

"Nothing at all," replied the coachman, decidedly.

"But——"

"No; not a sou. I am too much provoked to think that I took the money of those abominable jades! I wish what I bought to drink with their money had given me the colic. So pray feel no uneasiness about the score. If you need a carriage, take mine for nothing until you have caught the wretches."

Lecoq at that time was by no means rich, and he did not insist.

"You will at least take my name and my address?" continued the coachman.

"Certainly. The judge will wish to hear your deposition. You will receive a summons."

"Very well. Address Papillon (Eugene), coachman, at the house of Monsieur Trigault. I lodge there, because I have some small interest in the business, you see."

The young policeman was hastening away, when Papillon called him back.

"When you leave the morgue you will want to go

somewhere; you told me that you had an appointment, and that you were late now."

"Yes, I ought to be at the Palais de Justice; but it is only a few steps from here."

"No matter. I am going to wait for you at the corner. Ah! it is useless to say 'no;' I have made up my mind, and I am a Breton. I have a favor to ask of you. Ride out that thirty francs that those jades paid me."

It would have been cruel to refuse such a request. Lecoq made a motion of assent, and hurried toward the morgue.

If there was a crowd outside, it was because the gloomy place was full, literally packed inside.

Lecoq, to effect an entrance, was obliged to use his elbows vigorously.

Within, the sight was horrible; and it was terrible to think what disgusting sensations and emotions that ferocious throng had come to seek there.

There were women in great numbers, and crowds of young maidens.

The shop-girls and the workmen who reside in the neighborhood made a *détour*, in order to come and look upon the harvest of dead bodies which crime, carriage accidents, the Seine, and the canal St. Martin gather each day for the morgue. The most sensitive came no farther than the door, the more intrepid enter and relate their impressions to their less courageous companions on emerging from the horrible place.

When there is nobody there, when the marble slabs are unoccupied, the visitors are not pleased—hard as it may be to believe it.

But there was a full house that morning. All the slabs, with the exception of two, were occupied.

The atmosphere was terrible. A damp chill pene-

trated one's body, and from the panting crowd rose an infectious steam, heavily impregnated with the odor of the chloride of lime used as a disinfectant.

And with the whispers of the bystanders, which were interspersed with sighs and exclamations, was mingled, as a continuous accompaniment, the murmur of the water trickling from the spigot at the head of each slab; a tiny stream that flowed forth only to fall in fine spray upon the marble.

Through the small arched windows a gray light stole in on the exposed bodies, making each muscle stand out clearly, bringing into bold relief the ghastly tints of the lifeless flesh, and imparting a sinister aspect to the tattered clothing suspended about the room to aid in identification. This clothing, after a certain time, is sold—for nothing is wasted.

But Lecoq was too much occupied with his own thoughts to remark the horrors of the scene.

He scarcely bestowed a glance on the three victims. He was seeking Father Absinthe and did not see him anywhere.

Had Gevrol intentionally or unintentionally failed to fulfil his promise, or had Father Absinthe forgotten his duty in his morning dram?

Powerless to decide what the cause of his comrade's absence might be, Lecoq addressed the head keeper:

"It would seem that no one has yet recognized either of the unfortunate victims of the triple murder at the Widow Chupin's."

"No one. And yet, from the opening, we have had an immense crowd. If I were master here, on such days as this, I would ask an admission fee of two sous, and charge half price for children. It would bring in a round sum—would more than cover the expenses."

The idea thus presented offered an inducement to conversation, but Lecoq did not seize it.

"Excuse me," he interrupted. "Did they not send one of the agents of the secret-service here this morning?"

"Yes, there was one here."

"Has he gone away, then? I do not see him anywhere."

The keeper, before making any response, glanced suspiciously at the eager questioner, and at last, with some hesitancy of manner, he inquired:

"Are you one of them?"

This phrase came into circulation at the epoch when so many secret agents, whose business it was to excite revolt, flourished. Under the Restoration, this term was applied only to the police.

"He is one of them," or "He is not one of them." The expression has survived the circumstances that gave it birth.

"I am one of them," replied Lecoq, exhibiting his badge in support of his assertion.

"And your name?"

"Is Lecoq."

The face of the keeper was suddenly illumined by a smile.

"In that case," said he, "I have a letter for you, written by your comrade, who was obliged to go away. Here it is."

The detective at once broke the seal and read:

"Monsieur Lecoq——"

"Monsieur!" This simple formula of politeness brought a faint smile to the lips of the reader. Was it

not, on the part of Father Absinthe, an evident recognition of his colleague's superiority?

The young man saw in it an unquestioning devotion which it would be his duty to repay with the kind protection of the master for his first disciple.

He continued the perusal of his letter.

"MONSIEUR LECOQ—I had been standing on duty since the opening of the morgue, when about nine o'clock three young men entered, arm in arm. From their manner and appearance I judged them to be clerks in some store or warehouse. Suddenly I noticed that one of them had turned as white as his shirt; and calling the attention of his companions to one of the unknown victims, he said, 'Gustave!'

"His comrades put their hands over his lips, and one of them said: 'What are you about, you fool, to mix yourself up with this affair? Do you wish to get us into trouble?'

"Thereupon they went out, and I followed them.

"But the person who had spoken was so overcome that he could scarcely drag himself along; and his companions were obliged to take him to a little restaurant.

"I entered it myself, and it is there where I am writing this letter, while I watch them out of the corner of my eye. The head keeper will give you this note, explaining my absence. You will understand that I am going to follow these men. A. B. S."

The handwriting of this letter was almost illegible; there were faults of orthography in each line; but its meaning was clear and exact, and could not fail to awaken the most flattering hopes.

Lecoq's face was radiant when he returned to the car-

riage, and, as he urged on his horse, the old coachman could not refrain from saying:

"Things are going on to suit you."

A friendly "chut!" was the only response. It required all his attention to classify this new information.

When he descended from the carriage before the gate of the Palais de Justice, he experienced considerable difficulty in dismissing the old coachman, who insisted upon remaining at his orders. He succeeded at last, but even when he had reached the portico of the left entrance, the worthy driver, standing upon his carriage-box, shouted:

"At the house of Monsieur Trigault—do not forget —Father Papillon—No. 998—1,000 less 2——"

When he reached the third story of the left wing of the palace, and was about entering that long, narrow and sombre corridor known as the *galerie de l'instruction*, Lecoq addressed a door-keeper installed behind a heavy oaken desk.

"Monsieur d'Escorval is undoubtedly in his office," he remarked.

The man shook his head.

"Monsieur d'Escorval," he replied, "is not here this morning, and he will not be here for several weeks."

"Why so? What do you mean?"

"Last evening as he was alighting from his carriage, at his own door, he had a most unfortunate fall, and broke his leg."

CHAPTER XVI

One is rich—one has a carriage, horse and coachman—and when one passes leaning back upon the cushions, one receives many an envious glance.

But sometimes the coachman has taken a drop too much, and upsets the carriage; perhaps the horses run away and break everything, or the until then fortunate owner, in a moment of abstraction, misses the step, and fractures his limb upon the sharp curb-stone.

Such accidents are occurring every day; and the long list ought to make humble foot-passengers bless their lowly lot which preserves them from such perils.

On learning the misfortune that had befallen M. d'Escorval, Lecoq's face wore such an expression of consternation that the door-keeper could not help laughing.

"What is there so very extraordinary about it?" he demanded.

"I—oh! nothing——"

The detective did not speak the truth. The fact is, he had just been struck by the strange coincidence of these two events, *viz.*, the murderer's attempted suicide, and the fall of the judge.

But he did not allow the vague presentiment that flitted through his mind to assume form.

What connection could there be between the two facts?

Besides, he never allowed himself to be governed by prejudice, nor had he as yet enriched his formulary by the axiom which he afterward professed:

"Regard with distrust all circumstances which seem to favor our secret desires."

It is certain that Lecoq was far from being rejoiced at M. d'Escorval's accident, and that he would gladly have given a great deal if the misfortune could have been prevented. But he could not help saying to himself that he would, by this stroke of misfortune, be freed from all further disagreeable connection with a man whose superciliousness and disdain had, as it were, crushed him.

This thought caused a sensation of relief, almost of light-heartedness.

"In that case," he remarked to the door-keeper, "I shall have nothing to do here this morning."

"You must be joking. Does the world stop moving because one man is disabled? It is only an hour since the news came; but all the urgent business that M. d'Escorval had in charge has already been divided among the other judges."

"I came here about that terrible affair that occurred night before last."

"Eh! Why did you not say so? They are waiting for you, and a messenger has been sent to the prefecture for you already. Monsieur Segmuller has charge of the case."

Deep lines of doubt and perplexity appeared on Lecoq's forehead. He tried to remember the judge that bore this name, and wondered whether he should find himself *en rapport* with him.

"Yes," resumed the door-keeper, who seemed to be in a talkative mood: "Monsieur Segmuller—you do not seem to know him. He is a worthy man, not so grim in manner as most of our gentlemen. It was of him that a prisoner said one day, after his examination was over: 'That devil there has pumped me so well that

I shall certainly have my head chopped off; but, nevertheless, he is a good fellow!'"

It was with a heart somewhat lightened by these favorable reports, that Lecoq went and tapped at the door that had been indicated, and which bore the number 22.

"Come in!" called a pleasant voice.

Lecoq entered, and found himself face to face with a man about forty years of age, tall and rather corpulent, who said, at once:

"Ah! you are Agent Lecoq. Very well—take a seat. I am busy just now with the case, but I will attend to you in five minutes."

Lecoq obeyed, and furtively began a study of the man whose co-laborer he was to become.

His exterior corresponded perfectly with the description given by the door-keeper. Frankness and benevolence beamed on his plump face, which was lighted by very pleasant blue eyes.

Still, the young detective fancied that it would not be safe to trust too implicitly to these benign appearances.

And he was quite right.

Born near Strasbourg, M. Segmuller was blessed with that candid physiognomy that belongs to almost all the children of blond Alsace—a deceitful mask, which not unfrequently conceals Gascon cunning, rendered still more dangerous by a union with extreme caution.

M. Segmuller's mind was wonderfully penetrating and alert; but his system—every judge has his own—was good-humor. While some of his colleagues were as stiff and cutting in manner as the sword which the statute of Justice holds in her hand, he assumed a sim-

plicity and a kindness of demeanor, which never affected his firmness of character as a magistrate, however.

But his voice had such a paternal intonation, he veiled the subtle meaning of his questions and the hearing of the answers with such an affectation of frankness, that the man whom he questioned forgot the necessity of protecting himself, and revealed all. And while the culprit was congratulating himself upon getting the best of the judge, the poor wretch was being turned inside out like a glove.

Beside such a man, a grave and slender clerk would have excited distrust; so he had chosen one who was a caricature of himself. His name was Goquet. He was short, very corpulent, beardless, and smiling. His broad face was expressive of silliness rather than good-humor, and he was not particularly bright.

As M. Segmuller had said, he was studying the case which had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands.

All the articles which Lecoq had collected, *from the flakes of wool to the diamond ear-ring,* were spread out upon the magistrate's desk.

He read and re-read the report which had been written by Lecoq, and according to the different phases of the affair, he examined the objects before him, or consulted the plan of the ground.

Not at the end of five minutes, but at the close of a good half hour, he threw himself back in his arm-chair.

" Monsieur Lecoq," he said, slowly, " Monsieur d'Escorval has informed me by a note on the margin of this file of papers, that you are an intelligent man, and that we can trust you."

" My will, at least, is good."

" You speak too slightingly of yourself; this is the first time that an agent has brought me a report as com-

plete as yours. You are young; if you will persevere, I think you will be able to accomplish great things in your profession."

The young man bowed, pale with delight, and stammered his thanks.

"Your opinion in this matter coincides with mine," continued M. Segmuller. "The government attorney informs me that Monsieur d'Escorval shares this opinion. An enigma is before us; and it ought to be solved."

"Oh! we shall solve it, shall we not, Monsieur?" exclaimed Lecoq.

He indeed felt capable of extraordinary things; he was ready to go through fire and water for the judge who had received him so kindly. Such intense enthusiasm sparkled in his eyes that M. Segmuller could not restrain a smile.

"I have strong hopes of it myself," he responded; "but we are far from the end. Now, what have you been doing since yesterday. Did Monsieur d'Escorval give you any orders? Have you obtained any new information?"

"I think, Monsieur, that I have not wasted any time."

And immediately, with rare precision and with that happiness of expression which seldom fails the man who is thoroughly *en rapport* with his subject, Lecoq related all that he had discovered since his departure from the Poivrière.

He recounted the daring acts committed by the man whom he believed an accomplice, the points he had noted in the murderer's conduct, and the latter's unsuccessful attempt at self-destruction. He repeated the testimony given by the coachman, and by the *concièrge;* he read the letter he had received from Father Absinthe.

In conclusion, he placed upon the judge's desk some

of the earth he had procured in such a strange manner, and deposited beside it about the same quantity of dust that he had brought from the floor of the cell in which the murderer had been confined at the Barrière d'Italie.

Then, when he had explained the reasons which had influenced him, and the conclusions that might be drawn from the discovery he had made:

"Ah! you are right!" exclaimed M. Segmuller, "it may be that you have discovered a means to confound all the denials of the prisoner. It certainly is an evidence of surprising sagacity on your part."

It must have been, for Goquet, the clerk, nodded approvingly.

"Wonderful!" he murmured. "I should never have thought of that."

While he was talking, M. Segmuller had carefully placed all the articles of conviction in a large drawer, from which they would not emerge until the trial.

"Now," said he, "I understand the case well enough to examine the Widow Chupin. We may gain some information from her."

He laid his hand upon the bell; Lecoq made an almost supplicating gesture.

"I have one great favor to ask, Monsieur."

"What is it? speak."

"I should deem it a great favor if you would permit me to be present at this examination. It takes so little, sometimes, to awaken a happy inspiration."

The law says that the accused shall first be privately examined by the judge, assisted by his clerk; but it also allows the presence of agents of the police force.

"Very well," responded M. Segmuller, "remain."

He rang the bell; a messenger appeared.

"Has the Widow Chupin been brought here, in compliance with my orders?"

"Yes, Monsieur; she is here in the gallery."

"Let her come in."

An instant after, the woman entered, bowing to the right and to the left.

This was not her first appearance before a magistrate, and she was not ignorant of the respect that is due to justice.

So she had arrayed herself for her examination with the utmost care.

She had arranged her rebellious gray hair in smooth bandeaux, and she had done the best possible with the plain clothing she wore. She had even persuaded the keeper of the prison to purchase for her, with the money she had upon her person at the time of her arrest, a black *crêpe* bonnet and two white pocket-handkerchiefs, which she intended to deluge with her tears at pathetic moments.

To second these artifices of the toilette, she had drawn upon her *répertoire* of grimaces for an innocent, sad, and yet resigned air, well fitted, in her opinion, at least, to win the sympathy and indulgence of the magistrate upon whom her fate was to depend.

Thus disguised, with downcast eyes and honeyed voice, she looked so unlike the terrible termagant of the Poivrière, that her customers would scarcely have recognized her.

An honest old bachelor would have been more than likely to offer her twenty francs a month to take charge of his house.

But M. Segmuller had unmasked so many hypocrites that he was not deceived for a moment; and the thought

that entered his mind was the same that sparkled in the eyes of Lecoq:

"What an old *comédienne!*"

His penetration, it is true, may have been considerably aided by some notes he had just perused. These notes were simply an abstract of the woman's former life, which had been furnished by the chief of police, at the request of the judge.

M. Segmuller, by a gesture, warned his smiling clerk to be ready to write.

"Your name?" he demanded, brusquely.

"Aspassie Clapard, my good sir," replied the old woman; "the Widow Chupin, at your service, sir."

She executed a profound courtesy, and added:

"A lawful widow, you understand, sir; I have my marriage papers safe in my chest at home; and if you wish to send anyone——"

"Your age?" interrupted the judge.

"Fifty-four."

"Your profession?"

"Dealer in liquors, in Paris, near the Rue du Château-des-Rentiers, a few steps from the fortifications."

These questions as to individuality are always the first which are addressed to a prisoner.

They give both the judge and the accused time to study each other, to try each other's strength, as it were, before engaging in a serious struggle; as two adversaries about to engage in mortal combat first try a few passes with foils.

"Now," resumed the judge, "we will note your antecedents. Have you not already been found guilty of several offences?"

The old sinner was too well versed in criminal pro-

cedure to be ignorant of those famous records, which render the denial of identity such a difficult matter in France.

"I have been unfortunate, my good Judge," whined the old woman.

"Yes, a number of times. First, you were arrested on the charge of being a receiver of stolen goods."

"But it was proved that I was innocent, that my character was whiter than snow. My poor, dear husband had been deceived by his comrades; that was all."

"Possibly. But while your husband was submitting to his sentence, you were sentenced to imprisonment, first for one month, and afterward for a term of three months, for stealing."

"I had enemies who did their best to ruin me."

"Again you were imprisoned for having led some young girls astray."

"They were good-for-nothing hussies, my dear sir, heartless and unprincipled creatures. I did them many favors, and then they went and related a batch of falsehoods to ruin me. I have always been too kind and considerate toward others."

The list of the woman's offences was not exhausted, but M. Segmuller thought it useless to continue.

"Such is your past," he resumed. "At the present time your saloon is the resort of criminals and malefactors. Your son is serving out his fourth term of imprisonment; and it has been clearly proved that you abetted him and assisted him in his evil deeds. Your daughter-in-law, by some miracle, has remained honest and industrious, so you have tormented and abused her to such an extent that the authorities have been obliged to interfere. When she left your house

you tried to keep her child—in order to rear it like its father, undoubtedly."

"This," thought the old woman, "is the moment to soften the judge's heart." She drew her new handkerchief from her pocket, and endeavored, by rubbing her eyes energetically, to extract a tear. One might have drawn tears from a piece of parchment just as easily.

"Oh, unhappy me!" she groaned; "to suspect, to think that I would harm my grandson, my poor little Toto! I should be worse than the wild beasts, to wish to draw my own flesh and blood down to perdition."

But these lamentations did not seem to have much effect on the judge. She saw this, and, suddenly changing her mode of attack and her tone, she began her justification.

She did not positively deny her past; but she threw all the blame on destiny, which is not just, which favors some, but not usually the best, people, and which shows no mercy to others.

Alas! she was one of those who have had no chance in life, having always been innocent and persecuted. In this last affair, for example, how was she to blame? A triple murder had stained her saloon with blood; but the most respectable establishments are not exempt from similar catastrophes.

She had had time for reflection in her solitary confinement, she had searched the deepest recesses of her conscience, and she was still unable to discover what blame could justly be laid at her door.

"I can tell you," interrupted the judge. "You are accused of impeding the action of the law."

"*Mon Dieu!* is it possible?"

"And of seeking to defeat justice. This is equivalent to complicity, Widow Chupin; take care. When

the police entered your cabin, after this crime had been committed, you refused to answer their questions."

"I told them all that I knew."

"Very well; you must repeat it to me."

M. Segmuller had reason to be content. He had conducted the examination in such a way that the Widow Chupin had been naturally led to undertake the relation of the facts herself.

This was an excellent point gained. Direct questions would, perhaps, have put this shrewd old woman, who retained all her *sang-froid,* upon her guard; and it was necessary that she should not suspect what the judge knew, or what he was ignorant of, in relation to the affair.

So, by leaving her to her own devices, he might be able to discover in its entirety the version which she proposed to substitute for the truth.

This version, neither the judge nor Lecoq doubted, had been concerted at the station-house of the Place d'Italie between the murderer and the pretended drunkard, and afterward transmitted to the widow by the bold accomplice.

"Oh! the affair was very simple, my good sir," began the honest tavern-keeper. "Sunday evening I was sitting alone by the fire in my establishment, when suddenly the door opened, and I saw three men and two ladies enter."

M. Segmuller and the detective exchanged a rapid glance. The accomplice, then, had seen Lecoq and his companions examining the foot-prints, and did not intend to deny the presence of the two women.

"What time was this?" demanded the judge.

"About eleven o'clock."

"Go on."

"As soon as they sat down, they ordered a bowl of wine, *à la Française*. Without boasting, I may say that I have not an equal in preparing this beverage. Of course, I waited upon them, and afterward, having a blouse to mend for my boy, I went up to my room, which is on the floor above."

"Leaving these people alone?"

"Yes, my Judge."

"That showed a great deal of confidence on your part."

The widow sadly shook her head. "When one has nothing," she sighed, "one has no fear of thieves."

"Go on—go on."

"Well, I had been up there about half an hour, when I heard someone below call out: 'Eh! old woman!' I went down and found a large, heavily bearded man, who had just come in. He wished a glass of brandy. I waited upon him; he was seated alone at a table."

"And then you went back upstairs again?" interrupted the judge.

Did the Widow Chupin comprehend the concealed irony? Her physiognomy did not allow you to divine whether such was the case or not.

"Precisely, my good sir," she replied. "Only this time I had scarcely taken up my needle before I heard a terrible uproar in the saloon. I hurried downstairs to put a stop to it—ah well! yes! The three first-comers had fallen upon the new-comer, and they were beating him, my good sir, they were killing him. I screamed. Just then the man who had come in alone drew a pistol from his pocket; he fired and killed one of his assailants, who fell to the ground. I was so frightened that I crouched on the staircase and put my apron over my head that I might not see the blood run. An instant

later Monsieur Gevrol arrived with his men, they forced open the door, and behold——"

These wretched old women, who have trafficked in every sort of vice, and who have tasted every disgrace, sometimes attain a perfection of hypocrisy which deceives the most subtle penetration.

A man who had not been warned beforehand, would certainly have been impressed by the apparent candor of the Widow Chupin, so naturally was it put on, so perfect was the affectation of frankness, surprise, and fear which she displayed.

Unfortunately her eyes were against her—her small gray eyes, which were as restless as those of a caged animal, and which gleamed with cunning.

Meanwhile, she was mentally rejoicing at the success of her narrative, being convinced that the judge placed implicit confidence in her revelation.

In fact, not a single muscle of M. Segmuller's face had betrayed his impressions during the old woman's recital—a recital which, by the way, had been uttered with prestidigitator-like volubility.

When she paused, out of breath, he rose and without a word approached his clerk to look over the notes which Goquet had taken of this first part of the examination.

From the corner where he was quietly seated, Lecoq did not cease his watch over the prisoner.

"She thinks," he was saying to himself, "that it is all over; and that her deposition is accepted without question."

If such were, indeed, the widow's opinion, she was soon to be undeceived.

M. Segmuller, after a few low-spoken words to the smiling Goquet, took a seat near the fire-place, con-

vinced that the moment had come for pushing the examination more strongly.

"So, Widow Chupin," he began, "you affirm that you did not remain for a single moment with the people who came to your saloon for refreshments?"

"Not a moment."

"They entered and gave their order, you waited on them, and you left them at once?"

"Yes, my good sir."

"It seems to me impossible that you should not have caught some words of their conversation. What were they talking about?"

"I am not in the habit of watching and playing the spy over my customers."

"Did you not hear something?"

"Nothing."

The judge shrugged his shoulders with an air of commiseration.

"In other words," he remarked, "you refuse to inform the justice——"

"Oh, my good sir!"

"Allow me to finish. All these improbable stories about leaving the room, and mending your son's clothes in your chamber, you have invented, so that you could say to me: 'I have seen nothing; I have heard nothing; I know nothing.' If such is the system of defence you have adopted, I warn you that it will be impossible for you to sustain it, and that it will not be admitted by any tribunal."

"It is not a system of defence; it is the truth."

M. Segmuller seemed to reflect for a moment; then, suddenly, he said:

"Then you have nothing to tell me about this miserable assassin?"

"But he is not an assassin, my good sir."

"What do you mean by such an assertion?"

"I mean that he has only killed others in protecting himself. They sought a quarrel with him; he stood alone against three men; he saw very plainly that he could expect no mercy from brigands who——"

She suddenly checked herself, greatly embarrassed, as if reproaching herself for having gone too far; for having given too much liberty to her tongue.

She might reasonably hope, it is true, that the judge had not observed her indiscretion.

A brand had fallen from the fire down upon the hearth; he had taken the tongs, and his attention seemed to be engrossed in the task of artistically arranging his fire.

"Who can tell me—who can assure me that it was not this man, on the contrary, who first attacked the others?" he murmured, thoughtfully.

"I can," declared the widow, stoutly; "I can swear it."

M. Segmuller looked up, intense astonishment written upon every feature.

"How can you know that?" he said, slowly. "How can you swear it? You were in your chamber when the quarrel began."

Silent and motionless in his chair, Lecoq was inwardly jubilant. He thought that this was a most happy result, and that but a few questions more would be required to make the old woman contradict herself. He also assured himself that the proofs of her simplicity were increasing. Without a secret interest, the widow would never have undertaken the defence of the prisoner so imprudently.

"But you have probably been led to this conclusion

by your knowledge of the character of the murderer, with whom you are apparently well acquainted," remarked the judge.

"I never laid eyes upon him until that evening."

"But he must have been in your establishment before?"

"Never in his life."

"Oh, oh! Then, you can explain how it was that on entering the bar-room, while you were sitting in your room upstairs, this unknown person—this stranger—should have cried: 'Here, old woman!' Did he merely *guess* that the establishment was kept by a woman; and that this woman was no longer young?"

"He did not say that."

"Reflect a moment; you, yourself, just told me so."

"I did not say that, my good sir."

"Yes, you did, and I will prove it by reading your deposition to you. Goquet, read, if you please."

The smiling clerk at once found the passage, and in his clearest voice he read these words, taken down as they fell from the Widow Chupin's lips.

"I had been upstairs about half an hour, when I heard someone call from below: 'Eh! old woman!' I came down," etc., etc.

"Are you convinced?" insisted M. Segmuller.

The assurance of the old offender was sensibly diminished by this setback. But instead of discussing the subject further, the judge glided over it as if he did not attach much importance to the incident.

"And the other men," he resumed, "those who were killed; did you know them?"

"No, Monsieur, no more than I knew Adam and Eve."

"And were you not surprised to see three persons

entirely unknown to you, and accompanied by two ladies, enter your establishment?"

"Sometimes chance——"

"Come! you do not think what you are saying. It was not chance that brought these customers, in the middle of the night, to a saloon that has a reputation like yours—a saloon that is situated so far from any frequented route, and in the midst of a desolate waste."

"I am not a sorceress; what I say, that I think."

"Then you did not know even the youngest of the victims, the man who was attired as a soldier, Gustave, in short?"

"Not at all."

M. Segmuller noted the intonation of this response, and he added, more slowly:

"Certainly you must have heard allusion made to a friend of this Gustave, a man called Lacheneur?"

On hearing this name, the proprietress of the Poivrière became visibly embarrassed, and it was in an altered voice that she stammered:

"Lacheneur! Lacheneur! I have never heard that name mentioned."

She denied it, but the effect that had been produced was evident, and Lecoq secretly vowed that he would find this Lacheneur, or perish in the attempt. Was there not among the articles of conviction a letter from him, written, as he had reason to believe, in a *café* on the Boulevard Beaumarchais?

With such a clew and with patience!

"Now," continued M. Segmuller, "we will speak of the women who accompanied these unfortunate men. What sort of women were they?"

"Oh! some women of no account whatever!"

"Were they richly dressed?"

"Very miserably, on the contrary."

"Well, give me a description of them."

"They were—my good Judge, I scarcely saw them. They were large and powerfully built women, so much so, indeed, that at first, it being Shrove Sunday, I took them for men in disguise. They had hands like shoulders of mutton, gruff voices, and very black hair. They were as dark as mulattoes——"

"Enough!" interrupted the judge; "I require no further proof of your dishonesty. These women were small, and one of them was remarkably fair."

"I swear to you, my good sir——"

"Do not declare it upon oath. I shall be forced to confront you with an honest man, who will tell you that you are a liar!"

She did not reply, and there was a moment's silence. M. Segmuller decided to deal a decisive blow.

"Do you also affirm that you had nothing of a compromising character in the pocket of your apron?" he demanded.

"Nothing—you may have it examined; it was left in the house."

"Then you still persist?" resumed M. Segmuller. "Believe me, you are wrong. Reflect—it depends solely upon your deposition whether you go to the Court of Assizes as a witness, or as an accomplice."

Although the widow seemed crushed by this unexpected blow, the judge said no more. Her deposition was read, she signed it and went away.

M. Segmuller immediately seated himself at his desk, filled out a blank and handed it to his clerk, saying:

"This, Goquet, is an order to be given to the keeper of the prison. Tell him to send the murderer here at once."

CHAPTER XVII

To extort a confession from a man interested in preserving silence and persuaded that no proofs can be produced against him, is certainly a difficult task; but to demand the truth from a *woman;* under similar circumstances, is, as they say at the Palais de Justice, "attempting to make the devil confess."

After all, what had been gained by this examination, which had been conducted with the greatest possible care by a judge who knew how to manage his questions as well as a skilful general knows how to manœuvre his troops and place them in the best possible positions.

They had discovered unexceptionable proof of the Widow Chupin's connivance with the murderer, and nothing more.

"That old hag knows all," murmured Lecoq.

"Yes," replied the judge, "it is almost certain that she knew the people who came to her house—the women, the victims, the murderer—all of them, in fact; but it is certain that she knew this Gustave—I read it in her eyes. I am also convinced that she knows this Lacheneur—this man upon whom the dying soldier breathed vengeance—this mysterious personage who evidently possesses the key to the enigma. This man must be found."

"Ah! I will find him if I have to question each of the eleven hundred thousand men who walk the streets of Paris!"

This was promising so much that the judge, in spite of his preoccupation, could not repress a smile.

"If this old woman would only decide to make a

clean breast of it at her next examination!" remarked Lecoq.

"Yes. But she will never speak."

The detective shook his head despondingly. Such was his own opinion. He did not delude himself with false hopes, and he had noticed between the Widow Chupin's eyebrows, those furrows which betray the senseless obstinacy of the brute.

"Women never confess," resumed the judge; "and when they seem to resign themselves to making a revelation, it is only because they hope they have found a way to mislead the examiner. Evidence will crush the most obstinate man; he ceases to struggle; he makes a confession. A woman scoffs at evidence. Show her the sun, and she will close her eyes and reply: 'It is night.' Men plan and combine different systems of defence according to the social position in which they were born. Women have but one system, whatever their condition in life. They deny everything, and always; and they weep. When I push the Chupin with disagreeable questions, on her next examination, rest assured she will turn her eyes into a fountain of tears."

In his impatience, he angrily stamped his foot. He had many weapons in his arsenal; but he could find no weapon powerful enough to break a woman's dogged resistance.

"If I only understood the motive that guides this old hag!" he continued. "But not a clew! Who can tell me what powerful interest commands her to be silent? Is it her own cause that she is defending? Is she an accomplice? Who will prove to us that she did not aid the murderer in planning an ambuscade?"

"Yes," responded Lecoq, slowly, "yes; this supposition very naturally presents itself to the mind. But

think a moment; such a theory would prove that the premises which you admitted, Monsieur, a short time since were false. If the Widow Chupin is an accomplice, the murderer is not the person we have supposed him to be; he is simply the man whom he seems to be."

This argument was apparently convincing to M. Segmuller.

"What is your opinion?" he exclaimed.

The young detective had formed his opinion. But how could he, an humble policeman, venture to express an opinion when a judge hesitated?

He fully comprehended that his position necessitated extreme reserve on his part; and it was in the most modest tone possible that he said:

"Why might not the pretended drunkard have dazzled Mother Chupin's eyes with promises of a brilliant reward? Why might he not have promised her money, a large amount?"

He paused; the clerk had returned. Behind him was a soldier, who remained respectfully upon the threshold, his heels in a straight line, his right hand upon the visor of his shako, palm turned outward, the elbow on a level with his eye, in accordance with the ordinance.

"Monsieur," said the man, "the keeper of the prison sends me to inquire if he is to keep the Widow Chupin in solitary confinement; she complains bitterly on account of it."

M. Segmuller reflected for a moment.

"Certainly," he murmured, as if replying to an objection made by his own conscience; "certainly, it is a terrible aggravation of one's suffering; but if I allow this woman to associate with the other prisoners, she will certainly find some opportunity to communicate

with parties outside. This must not be; the interests of justice and of truth must be considered first."

This last thought decided him.

"It is decided that the prisoner must be kept in solitary confinement until further orders."

The soldier allowed his right hand to fall at his side, carried his right foot three inches back of his left heel, wheeled around and departed.

When the door had closed on the soldier's retreating form, the smiling clerk drew a large envelope from his pocket, and handed it to the judge.

"Here is a communication from the keeper of the prison," he remarked.

The judge broke the seal, and read aloud:

"I feel compelled to counsel the judge to surround himself with every precaution before proceeding to the examination of the prisoner, May.

"Since his unsuccessful attempt at suicide, this prisoner has been in a state of excitement that has obliged us to confine him in a strait-jacket. He did not close his eyes during the night, and the guards who were watching him expected every moment to see him become insane. Still, he has not uttered a word.

"When food was offered him this morning, he rejected it with horror, and I should not be surprised if it were his intention to starve himself to death.

"I have rarely seen a more dangerous malefactor. I think him capable of almost any desperate act."

"Ah!" exclaimed the clerk, whose smile had disappeared, "if I were in the place of Monsieur le Juge, I would have the soldiers who brought him here come in with him."

"What! you—Goquet, you, an old clerk—make such a proposition! Can it be that you are afraid?"

"Afraid! No, certainly not; but——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Lecoq, in a tone that betrayed his confidence in his great strength. "Am I not here?"

If M. Segmuller had seated himself at his desk, that article of furniture would have served as a rampart between the prisoner and himself. He usually occupied that seat; but after the fear evinced by his clerk, he would have blushed to avail himself of the slightest protection.

He therefore took a seat by the fireplace, as he had done a few moments before while questioning the Chupin, and ordered his door-keeper to admit the prisoner alone. He emphasized the word "alone."

A second after the door was flung open with terrible violence, and the murderer entered, or rather precipitated himself, into the room.

Goquet turned pale behind his table, and Lecoq advanced a step, ready to make a spring forward.

But when he reached the centre of the room, the prisoner paused and looked around him.

"Where is the judge?" he inquired, in a hoarse voice.

"I am the judge," replied M. Segmuller.

"No, the other."

"What other?"

"The one who came to question me last evening."

"He has met with an accident. Yesterday, after leaving you, he fell and broke his leg."

"Oh!"

"And I am to take his place."

But the prisoner was apparently deaf to the explanation. A stupor had suddenly succeeded his frenzied excitement. His features, which had been so distorted

with rage, relaxed. He became livid; he tottered, as if about to fall.

"Compose yourself," said the judge, in a benevolent tone; "if you are too weak to remain standing, take a seat."

Already with a powerful effort, the man had recovered his self-possession. A flame, instantly suppressed, flashed from his eyes.

"Many thanks for your kindness," he replied, "but this is nothing. I felt a slight sensation of dizziness, but it is over now."

"Is it long since you have eaten anything?"

"I have eaten nothing since this man"—he pointed to Lecoq—"brought me some bread and wine in the station-house over there."

"Do you not feel the need of something?"

"No—and yet—if you would be so good—I would like a glass of water."

"Will you not have some wine with it?"

"I should prefer the pure water."

They brought him what he desired.

He drained the first glass at a single draught; the second he drank more slowly.

One might have supposed that he was drinking in life itself. He seemed to have been born again.

CHAPTER XVIII

Eighteen out of every twenty criminals who appear before the judge are armed with a more or less complete plan of defence, which they have conceived and perfected in their solitary cells.

Innocent or guilty, they have adopted a *rôle* that com-

mences the instant they cross the threshold of that dread room where the magistrate awaits them.

The moment of the prisoner's entrance is one in which the judge must bring all his powers of penetration into play.

The attitude of the man as surely betrays his plan of defence as an index-table reveals the contents of a book.

But in this case M. Segmuller did not think that appearances were deceitful. It was evident to him that the accused had not thought of feigning anything; and that the excited frenzy which marked his entrance was as real as his present stupor.

At least, all the danger of which the keeper had spoken was apparently over. The judge, therefore, seated himself at his desk. He felt more at ease there, and so to speak, more strong. There his back was turned to the window, his face was half hidden in shadow; and in case of need, he could, by bending over his desk, conceal his surprise, or any sign of discomfiture.

The prisoner, on the contrary, stood in the full light, and not a movement of his features, not the fluttering of an eyelid would escape the attention of the judge.

He seemed to have entirely recovered from his indisposition; and his features had assumed an expression of careless indifference, or of complete resignation.

"Do you feel better?" inquired M. Segmuller.

"I feel very well."

"I hope," continued the judge, paternally, "that you will know how to moderate your transports after this. Yesterday you tried to destroy yourself. It would have been another great crime added to many others—a crime which——"

With a brusque gesture, the prisoner interrupted him.

"I have committed no crime," said he, in a rough, but no longer threatening, voice. "I was attacked, and I defended myself. Anyone has a right to do that. There were three enraged men upon me. It was a great misfortune, and I would give my right hand to repair it; but my conscience does not reproach me—that much!"

"That much," was a contemptuous snap of his finger and thumb.

"Yet I have been arrested and treated as an assassin," he continued. "When I saw myself interred in that living tomb which you call a secret cell, I was afraid; I lost my senses. I said to myself: 'My boy, they have buried you alive; and it is better to die, and that quickly, if you do not wish to suffer.' Then I tried to strangle myself. My death would have brought sorrow to no one. I have neither wife nor child dependent upon me. To prevent me from destroying myself after, I was bled; they placed me in a strait-jacket, as if I were a madman. Mad! I really believed I should become so. All night long the jailers were around me, like children who are amusing themselves by tormenting a chained animal. They watched me; they talked about me; they passed the candle to and fro before my eyes."

All this was uttered with intense bitterness, but without any display of anger—forcibly, but with no attempt at oratorical display; uttered, in short, as one's deep emotions and convictions are always uttered.

And the same thought entered the mind of the judge and of the detective at the same instant.

"This man," they thought, "is very clever; it will not be easy to get the advantage of him."

After a moment's reflection M. Segmuller said:

"This explains your first act of despair in the prison; but later, this morning even, you refused the nourishment that was offered to you."

The man's lowering face brightened suddenly on hearing this remark; he gave a comical wink, and finally burst into a hearty laugh—a gay, frank, sonorous laugh.

"That," said he, "is quite another thing. Certainly, I refused all they offered me, and now I will tell you why. I had my hands confined in the strait-jacket, and the jailer tried to feed me as a nurse feeds a baby with broth. Ah! no, I thank you. I closed my lips with all my strength. Then he tried to force open my mouth and push the spoon in, as he would open the mouth of a sick dog and push his medicine down his throat. Devil take his impertinence! I tried to bite him; that is the truth, and if I had succeeded in getting his finger between my teeth, it would have stayed there. And only because I have done this, they raise their hands to heaven in holy horror, and pointing at me say: 'Here is a terrible man! a horrible rascal!'"

He seemed to enjoy the recollection of the scene exceedingly, for he burst into another hearty laugh, to the great amazement of Lecoq, and to the great scandal of good Goquet, the clerk.

M. Segmuller also found it very difficult to conceal his intense surprise.

"You are too reasonable, I hope," said he, at last, "to attach any blame to these men, who, in confining you, were merely obeying the orders of their superior officers, and who were only trying to save you from your own violent passions."

"Hum!" responded the prisoner, becoming serious at once. "I do, however, and if I had one of them in

a corner— But I shall get over it. If I know myself, I have no more spite in my composition than a chicken."

"It depends only upon yourself how you are to be treated; be calm and they will never place you in a strait-jacket. But you must be quiet and well-behaved."

The murderer sadly shook his head.

"I shall be very prudent hereafter," said he; "but it is terribly hard to stay in prison when one has nothing to do. If I had comrades, we could laugh and chat, and the time would slip by; but to remain alone, entirely alone, in that cold cell, where one hears not even a sound—it is horrible. It is so damp there that the water trickles down the walls, and one might swear that the moisture was real tears, men's tears, issuing from the stone."

The judge bent over the desk to make a note. The word "comrades" had attracted his attention, and he proposed to make the prisoner explain it later.

"If you are innocent," he remarked, "you will soon be released; but it is necessary to establish your innocence."

"What must I do to establish it?"

"Tell the truth, the whole truth: answer honestly and unreservedly the questions I shall put to you."

"As for that, you may depend upon me."

He lifted his hands, as if to call upon God and man to witness his sincerity. M. Segmuller ordered him to drop it, adding:

"Parties who are accused do not take the oath."

"Indeed!" said the man, with an astonished air; "that is strange!"

Although the judge had apparently paid but little attention to the prisoner, he had not failed to notice his every movement. He had desired to reassure him, to

make him feel at ease, to quiet his suspicions as much as possible; and he believed that this result had been attained.

"Now," said he, "you will give me your attention; and do not forget that your liberty depends upon your frankness. What is your name?"

"May."

"What is your Christian name?"

"I have none."

"That is impossible."

A movement of the prisoner betrayed an impatience which was quickly suppressed.

"This," he replied, "is the third time since yesterday I have received that answer. What I told you is the truth, however. If I were a liar, nothing would be easier than for me to tell you that my name was Peter, James, or John. But lying is not my *forte*. Really, I have no Christian name. If it were a question of surnames, it would be quite another thing. I have had plenty of them."

"What were they?"

"Let me see—to commence with, when I was with Father Fougasse, I was called Affiloir, because, you see——"

"Who was this Father Fougasse?"

"The king of men for wild beasts, Monsieur. Ah! he could boast of a menagerie that was a menagerie. Tigers, lions, paroquets of every color, serpents as large as your thigh—he had everything. But unfortunately——"

Was the man jesting, or was he in earnest? It was so hard to decide, that M. Segmuller and Lecoq were equally in doubt. Goquet, while writing his report, laughed.

"Enough," interrupted the judge. "How old are you?"

"Forty-four or forty-five years of age."

"Where were you born?"

"In Brittany, probably."

In this reply M. Segmuller thought he discovered an inclination to levity, which must be repressed.

"I warn you," said he, severely, "that if you go on in this way your liberty will be greatly compromised. Each of your responses is a breach of propriety."

The most sincere distress, mingled with anxiety, was visible upon the countenance of the murderer.

"Ah! I meant no offence, sir," he sighed. "You questioned me and I replied. You will see that I have spoken the truth, if you will allow me to tell you the history of the whole affair."

CHAPTER XIX

"When the prisoner speaks, the prosecution is instructed," is an old proverb at the Palais de Justice.

It does, indeed, seem almost impossible for a culprit, closely watched by the judge, to speak more than a few words without betraying his intentions or his thoughts; without, in short, revealing more or less of the secret he is endeavoring to conceal.

Even the most simple-minded of criminals understand this, and those who are most shrewd, are generally most reserved.

Confining themselves entirely to the few facts upon which they have founded their defence, they leave this safe ground only when they are absolutely compelled to do so, and then only with the utmost caution.

When questioned, they reply of course, but always briefly; and they are very sparing of details.

In this case, however, the accused was prodigal of words. He did not seem to apprehend that there was danger lest he should cut his own throat. He did not hesitate like those who are fearful of misplacing a word of the romance they are substituting for the truth.

Under other circumstances this fact would have been a strong argument in his favor.

"You may tell your own story, then," was M. Segmuller's response to the indirect request of the prisoner.

The murderer did not attempt to conceal the joy which had been awakened in his heart by being allowed to plead his own cause, in his own way.

The sparkling of his eyes, the dilation of his nostrils revealed his satisfaction.

He seated himself, threw his head back, passed his tongue over his lips as if to moisten them, and said:

"Am I to understand that you wish to hear my history?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know that one day about forty-five years ago, Father Tringlot, the manager of a travelling company of athletes and acrobats, was going from Guingamp to Sainte-Briene. He was making the journey in two large carriages with his wife, his equipments, and the members of his company. Very well. But soon after leaving quite a large city named Chatelaudren, he perceived something white lying by the roadside, near the edge of a ditch. 'I must go and see what that is,' he said to his wife. He stopped the horses, descended from the carriage, went to the ditch, picked up the object and uttered a cry of surprise. You will ask me 'what this man has found?' Ah! *mon Dieu!* A mere

trifle. He had found your very humble servant; then aged about six months."

With these last words, he made a low bow to his auditors.

"Naturally, Father Tringlot carried me to his wife," he continued. "She was a kind-hearted woman. She took me, examined me, fed me, and said: 'He is a strong, healthy child; we will keep him, since his mother has been so wicked as to abandon him. I will teach him; and in five or six years he will be an honor to us.' Then they tried to decide upon a name for me. It was in the early part of the month of May, so they concluded to call me May; and May I have been from that day to this."

He paused, and looked from one to another of his listeners, as if seeking some sign of approval.

None being forthcoming, he went on with his story:

"Father Tringlot was an uneducated man, and entirely ignorant of the law. He did not inform the authorities that he had found a child, and for this reason, although I was living, I did not exist, for to exist it is necessary to have one's name and birth inscribed upon the mayor's register.

"When I became older, I rather congratulated myself on this omission on Father Tringlot's part.

"I said to myself: 'May, my boy, you have no place on any government register, consequently there is no fear that you will ever be drawn as a soldier.'

"I had no desire to be a soldier; no fancy for being made food for bullets and cannon-balls.

"Afterward, when the age for conscription had passed, a lawyer told me that I would make a great deal of trouble for myself if I sought a place on the civil register at that late day; so I decided to exist surreptitiously.

"And this is why I have no Christian name, and why I cannot say exactly where I was born."

If truth has any particular accent of its own, as moralists have asserted, the murderer had found that accent.

Voice, gesture, glance, expression, all were in accord; not a word of his long story had rung false.

"Now," said M. Segmuller, coldly, "what are your means of subsistence?"

By the discomfited mien of the murderer one would have supposed that he had expected to see his prison doors fly open at the conclusion of his last remarks.

"I have a profession," he replied, plaintively. "The one taught me by Mother Tringlot. I subsist by its practice; and I have lived in France and in other countries."

The judge thought he had found a flaw in the armor.

"Do you say you have lived in foreign countries?" he inquired.

"Yes; during the seventeen years that I formed a part of Monsieur Simpson's company, I travelled most of the time in England and in Germany."

"Then you are a gymnast and an athlete. How is it that your hands are so white and so soft?"

Far from being embarrassed, the prisoner lifted his hands and examined them with evident complacency.

"It is true that they are pretty," said he; "that is because I take good care of them and do not use them."

"Do they pay you, then, for doing nothing?"

"Ah, no, indeed! But, sir, my duty consists in speaking to the public, in turning a compliment, and in making things pass off pleasantly, as the saying is; and, without boasting, I flatter myself that I have a certain knack——"

M. Segmuller stroked his chin, according to his habit when a prisoner committed some grave blunder.

"In that case," said he, "will you give me an exhibition of your talent?"

"Ah, ha," laughed the man, evidently supposing this a jest on the part of the magistrate. "Ah, ha!"

"Obey, if you please," insisted the judge.

The murderer made no objection. His mobile face immediately assumed an entirely different expression; a singular mixture of impudence, conceit, and irony played upon his features.

He caught up a ruler that was lying upon the desk, and in a shrill falsetto voice, and with many flourishes, he began:

"Silence, music! And you, big drum, hold your peace! This, ladies and gentlemen, is the hour, the moment, and the instant for the grand and only performance of these great artists; unequalled in the world in their feats upon the trapeze and on the tight-rope, and in other exercises of grace, suppleness, and strength."

"That is sufficient," interrupted the judge. "You can speak thus in France; but what do you say in Germany?"

"Of course, I use the language of that country."

"Let us see!" commanded M. Segmuller, whose mother-tongue was German.

The prisoner dropped his mocking manner, assumed an air of comical importance, and, without the slightest hesitation he said, in very emphatic tones:

"*Mit Bewilligung der hochloeblichen Obrigkeit wird heute vor hiesiger ehrenwerthen Burgerschaft zum* erstenmal *aufgefuhrt*—Genovesa, oder del——"*

* "With the permission of the local authorities, there will now be presented before the honorable citizens, for the first time—Genevieve, or the——"

"Enough," said the judge, harshly.

He rose to conceal his chagrin, perhaps, and added:

"We will send for an interpreter who can tell us whether you speak English as fluently."

On hearing these words, Lecoq modestly stepped forward.

"I speak English," said he.

"Very well. You hear, prisoner?"

But the man was already transformed. Britannic gravity and apathy were written upon his features; his gestures were stiff and constrained, and it was in the most ponderous tones that he said:

"Ladies and gentlemen: Long life to our queen, and to the honorable mayor of this town! No country, England excepted—our glorious England!—could produce such a marvellous thing, such a paragon——"

For a minute or two longer he continued in the same strain.

M. Segmuller was leaning upon his desk, his face bowed upon his hands. Lecoq could not conceal his astonishment.

Only Goquet, the smiling clerk, found the scene amusing.

CHAPTER XX

The keeper of the depot, a functionary who had gained the reputation of being an oracle by twenty years of experience in prisons and with prisoners—a man whom it was difficult to deceive—had written to the judge:

"Surround yourself with every precaution before examining the prisoner, May."

And instead of the dangerous malefactor, the very announcement of whose coming had made the clerk turn pale, the prisoner proved to be a practical, harmless, and jovial philosopher, vain of his eloquence, a man whose existence depended upon his ability to turn a compliment; in short, a somewhat erratic genius.

This was a strange mistake. But this did not cause M. Segmuller to abandon the theory advanced by Lecoq; he had become more than ever convinced of its truth.

If he remained silent, with his elbows propped upon his desk, and his hands clasped over his eyes, it was only that he might gain time for reflection.

The manner and attitude of the prisoner was remarkable.

When his English "compliment" was ended, he remained standing in the centre of the room, his countenance wearing an expression half pleased, half anxious. But he was as much at ease as if he were upon the stage where, if one could believe his story, he had passed the greater part of his life.

By the combined efforts of all his intellectual powers and his penetration, the judge attempted to seize upon something, even if it were only some indication of weakness on his face, which in its mobility was more enigmatical than the bronze face of the sphinx.

Thus far M. Segmuller had been worsted in the encounter.

It is true, however, that he had made no direct attack, nor had he made use of any of the weapons which Lecoq had forged for his use.

But he was none the less annoyed at his defeat. It was easy to discern this by the brusque manner in

which he lifted his head after a few moments of silence.

"I see that you speak three European languages correctly," said he. "It is a rare talent."

The prisoner bowed, and smiled complacently.

"But that does not establish your identity," continued the judge. "Have you any acquaintances in Paris? Can you indicate any respectable person who will vouch for the truth of this story?"

"Ah! Monsieur, it is seventeen years since I left France."

"It is unfortunate, but the prosecution would not be content with such reasons. It would be too easy to escape the consequences of one's former life. Tell me of your last patron, Monsieur Simpson. Who was this man?"

"Monsieur Simpson is a rich man," replied the prisoner, rather coldly, "worth more than two hundred thousand francs, and honest. In Germany he travelled with a show of marionettes, in England with a collection of phenomena, to suit the taste of the country."

"Very well! This millionnaire could testify in your favor; it would be easy to find him, I suppose."

"Certainly," May responded, emphatically. "Monsieur Simpson would willingly do me this favor. It would be easy enough to find him, only it would require considerable time."

"Why?"

"Because at the present moment he is—he must be *en route* to America. It was on account of this journey that I left his company—I detest the ocean."

The intense anxiety that had stopped the beatings of Lecoq's heart was dissipated. He breathed again.

"Ah!" said the judge, very slowly.

"When I say that he is *en route*," resumed the prisoner, "I may be mistaken. He may not have started yet. But he had arranged all his business matters for departure before we separated."

"Upon what ship was he to sail?"

"He did not tell me."

"Where was he when you left him?"

"At Leipsic."

"When was this?"

"Last Wednesday."

M. Segmuller shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"Do you say you were in Leipsic on Wednesday? How long have you been in Paris?"

"Since Sunday afternoon, at four o'clock."

"It will be necessary to prove that."

By the contracted brow of the murderer, one would naturally have supposed that he was making a strenuous effort to remember something. For about a minute he seemed to be seeking something. He cast questioning glances first at the ceiling, then at the floor, scratching his head and tapping his foot in evident perplexity.

"How *can* I prove it—how?" he murmured.

The judge did not appear disposed to wait.

"I will make a suggestion to aid you," said he. "The people at the inn where you boarded while in Leipsic must remember you."

"We did not stop at an inn."

"Where did you eat and sleep, then?"

"In Monsieur Simpson's large travelling-carriage; it had been sold, but he was not to give it up until he reached the port from which he was to embark."

"What port was that?"

"I do not know."

Less accustomed to concealing his impressions than

the judge, Lecoq could not help rubbing his hands, so great was his satisfaction. He saw that the prisoner was convicted of falsehood—" driven to the wall," as he expressed it.

" So you have only your own affirmation to offer in support of this story? " inquired the judge.

" Wait a moment," said the accused, extending his arm as if to clutch a still vague inspiration, " wait a moment. When I arrived in Paris I had a trunk; it contains my linen, which is all marked with the first letter of my name. There are also some coats, several pairs of pantaloons, and two costumes for wear when I appear in public."

" Go on."

" On my arrival in Paris I took this trunk to a hotel quite near the railway station."

He stopped short, evidently embarrassed.

" What is the name of this hotel? " demanded the judge.

" Alas! that is exactly what I am trying to recollect. I have forgotten it. But I have not forgotten the house. I can see it yet; and, if someone would take me to the neighborhood, I should certainly recognize it. The people at the hotel would know me; besides, my trunk would prove the truth of my story."

Lecoq mentally resolved to make a tour of investigation through the hotels which surrounded the Northern depot.

" Very well," remarked the judge. " Perhaps we will do as you request. Now, there are two questions which I desire to ask. If you arrived in Paris at four o'clock in the afternoon, how did it happen that by midnight of the same day you had found the Poivrière, a haunt of notorious characters, situated in a lonely spot, and

which it would be impossible to find at night if one was not familiar with the locality? In the second place, how does it happen, if you possess such clothing as you describe, that you are so poorly dressed?"

The man smiled at these questions.

"That is what I will explain to you," he responded. "When one travels third-class, one is sure to ruin one's clothing; that is why, on leaving Leipsic, I put on the worst clothing I had. When I arrived here, and felt the pavements of Paris beneath my feet, I went wild with delight. I became a fool. I had some money in my pocket—it was Shrove Sunday—my only thought was to make a night of it. I did not think of changing my clothes. Having formerly found much amusement near the Barrière d'Italie, I hastened there, and entered a wine-shop. While I was eating a morsel, two men came in and began talking about spending the night at a ball at the Rainbow. I asked them to take me with them; they consented. I paid their bill, and we started. But soon after our arrival there these young men left me and joined the dancers. It was not long before I began to weary of playing the part of looker-on. Vexed and disappointed, I left the inn, and being foolish enough to dislike to ask my way, I wandered on and lost my way while traversing a large tract of unoccupied land. I was about to retrace my steps, when I saw a light in the distance. I walked straight toward it, and arrived at that cursed hovel."

"What happened then?"

"Oh! I went in; called for someone. A woman came. I asked for a glass of brandy; she brought it. I sat down and lighted a cigar. Then I looked about me. The interior was horrible enough to frighten one. Three men and two women were drinking and chatting

in low tones at another table. My face did not seem to suit them. One of them rose, came to me and said: 'You are a policeman; you have come here to play the spy on us; that is very plain.' I answered that I was not. He replied that I was. I again declared that I was not. In short, he swore that he was sure of it, and that I had on a false beard. Thereupon he caught hold of my beard and pulled it. This made me mad. I jumped up, and with a blow of my fist felled him to the ground. Misery! In an instant all the others were upon me! I had my revolver—you know the rest."

"And the two women, while this was going on, what were they doing?"

"Ah! I was too busy to pay any attention to them. They disappeared!"

"But you saw them when you entered the saloon—what were they like?"

"They were, upon my word! two big, ugly creatures, as tall as grenadiers, and as dark as moles!"

Between plausible falsehood and improbable truth, justice, human justice, and therefore liable to error, is compelled to decide as best it can.

For the past hour M. Segmuller had not been free from mental disquietude. But his doubts all vanished when he heard the prisoner declare that the two women were tall and dark.

In his opinion this audacious falsehood proved that there was a perfect understanding between the murderer and the Widow Chupin.

If the man had said: "The women were fair," M. Segmuller would not have known what to believe.

Certainly, his satisfaction was great; but his face did not betray it. It was of the utmost importance that the

prisoner should believe that he had succeeded in deceiving the judge.

"You must understand how necessary it is to find these women," said the judge kindly. "If their testimony corresponds with your allegations, your innocence will be proved conclusively."

"Yes, I understand that; but how can I put my hand upon them?"

"The police can aid you—these agents are always at the service of prisoners who desire to make use of them in establishing their innocence. Did you make any observations which might aid in the discovery of these women?"

Lecoq, whose eyes never wandered from the prisoner's face, fancied that he saw the least shadow of a smile on the man's lips.

"I remarked nothing," he said, coldly.

M. Segmuller had opened the drawer of his desk a moment before. He now took from it the ear-ring which had been found at the scene of the tragedy, and, handing it abruptly to the prisoner, he asked:

"So you did not notice this in the ear of one of the women?"

The imperturbable coolness of the accused did not forsake him.

He took the ornament, examined it attentively, held it up to the light, admired its brilliant fires, and said:

"It is a very handsome stone; but I did not notice it."

"This stone," remarked the judge, "is a diamond."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and worth several thousand francs."

"So much as that!"

This exclamation was in accord with the spirit of his

rôle; but the prisoner had failed to assume a suitable show of simplicity, or rather, he had exaggerated it.

A nomad like himself, who had, as he claimed, visited all the capitals of Europe, would not have been so astonished on hearing the value of a diamond.

Still, M. Segmuller did not seem to notice the discrepancy.

"Another thing," said he. "When you threw down your pistol, crying: 'Come and take me,' what did you intend to do?"

"I intended to make my escape."

"In what way?"

"*Dame!* by the door, sir—by——"

"Yes, by the back door," said the judge, with freezing irony. "It remains for you to explain how you—you who had just entered that hovel for the first time—could have known of this door."

For the first time the eye of the prisoner grew troubled; his assurance disappeared. But it was only for an instant; then he laughed, but it was a false laugh, that poorly concealed his anxiety.

"What nonsense!" he responded. "I had just seen the two women go out by that door."

"Pardon me, you have just declared that you did not see the departure of these women; that you were too busy to watch their movements."

"Did I say that?"

"Word for word; the passage shall be read to you. Goquet, read."

The clerk read the passage referred to, but the man undertook to show that they had misunderstood his remark. "He had not said—at least, he did not intend to say—they had quite misunderstood him——"

Lecoq was jubilant.

"Ah! my good fellow," he thought, "you contradict yourself—you are in deep water—you are lost."

This reflection was the more just as the situation of the prisoner was like that of a man who, without knowing how to swim, had advanced into the sea until the water was above his chin. Thus far he had preserved his equilibrium very well; but now he totters—soon he loses his footing—he sinks!

"Enough—enough!" said the judge. "Now, if you started out merely with the intention of amusing yourself, how did it happen that you took your pistol with you?"

"I had it with me while I was travelling, and I did not think to leave it at the hotel any more than I thought to change my clothes."

"Where did you purchase it?"

"It was given me by Monsieur Simpson as a souvenir."

"Confess that this Monsieur Simpson is a very convenient personage," said the judge coldly. "Still, go on with your story. Two chambers only of this murderous weapon have been discharged, and three men were killed. You have not told me the end of the affair."

"Alas!" exclaimed the man, in saddened tones, "what is the use? Two of my assailants had fallen; the struggle now was an equal one. I seized the remaining man, the soldier, about the body, and threw him down. He fell against a corner of the table, and did not rise again."

M. Segmuller had unfolded upon his desk the plan of the saloon drawn by Lecoq.

"Come here," he said, addressing the prisoner, "and indicate upon the paper the precise spot occupied by you and by your adversaries."

May obeyed, and with an assurance of manner a little surprising in a man in his apparent position, he explained the drama.

"I entered," said he, "by this door, marked C; I seated myself at the table, H, which is to the left of the entrance; the others occupied this table, which is between the fireplace, F, and the window, B."

When he had finished:

"I must admit," said the judge, "that your assertions are in perfect accord with the statements of the physicians, who say that one of the shots must have been fired at a distance of about a yard, and the other, at a distance of about two yards."

The accused had triumphed; but he only shrugged his shoulders and murmured:

"That proved that the physicians knew their business."

Lecoq was delighted; he felt that, had he been a judge, he would have conducted this examination in precisely the same way.

He blessed Heaven that had given him M. Segmuller, in place of M. d'Escorval.

"This admitted," resumed the judge, "there remains to be explained a sentence uttered by you when this agent, whom you see here, arrested you."

"What sentence?"

"You said: 'It is the Prussians who are coming; I am lost!' What did you mean by that?"

A fleeting crimson tinged the cheek of the prisoner. It was evident that he had anticipated the other questions, and that he had been prepared for them; but that this one was unexpected.

"It is very strange," said he, with ill-disguised embarrassment, "that I should have said such a thing!"

" Five persons heard you," insisted the judge.

Evidently he was endeavoring to gain time; he was hunting for an explanation.

" After all," replied the man, " the thing is very possible. It was a phrase that was often repeated by an old soldier of Napoleon's body-guard, who, after the battle of Waterloo, entered the service of Monsieur Simpson."

This explanation, though rather slow in coming, was none the less ingenious. At last M. Segmuller appeared to be perfectly satisfied.

" That is very plausible," said he; " but there is one circumstance that passes my comprehension. Were you freed from your assailants before the entrance of the policemen? Answer me, yes or no."

" Yes."

" Then, why, instead of making your escape by the door, whose existence you had divined, did you remain upon the threshold of the communicating door, with a table before you to serve as a barricade, your pistol directed toward the police, holding them at bay? "

The man hung his head, and they were obliged to wait for his response.

" I was a fool," he stammered, at last. " I did not know whether these men were agents of the police force or friends of the men I had killed."

" Your self-interest would have impelled you to flee from one as well as from the other."

The murderer was silent.

" Ah, well! " resumed M. Segmuller, " the prosecution is of the opinion that you designedly and voluntarily exposed yourself to the danger of arrest in order to protect the retreat of the two women who were in the saloon."

"Why should I have risked my own safety for two hussies whom I did not even know?"

"Pardon me. The prosecution are strongly inclined to believe that you know these two women very well."

"I should like to see anyone prove this!"

He laughed sneeringly, but the laugh was frozen upon his lips by the tone of assurance in which the judge uttered these words:

"I will prove this to you!"

CHAPTER XXI

These difficult and delicate questions of personal identity are the bane of magistrates.

Railroads, photography, and telegraphic communication have multiplied the means of investigation in vain. Every day it happens that malefactors succeed in deceiving the judge in regard to their true personality, and thus escape the consequences of their former crimes.

This is so frequently the case that a witty attorney-general once laughingly remarked—and, perhaps, he was only half in jest:

"This uncertainty in regard to identity will cease only on the day when the law prescribes that a number shall be branded upon the shoulder of every child whose birth is reported to the mayor."

M. Segmuller certainly wished that a number had been branded upon the enigmatical prisoner before him.

And yet he did not by any means despair, and his confidence, exaggerated though it might be, was not feigned.

He thought this circumstance in connection with the

two women was the weak spot in the prisoner's plan of defence—the point upon which he must concentrate all his efforts.

When he felt that his threat had had time to produce its full effect, he continued:

"So, prisoner, you assert that you were acquainted with none of the persons you met in the saloon?"

"I swear it."

"Have you never had occasion to meet one Lacheneur, an individual whose name is connected with this unfortunate affair?"

"I heard this name for the first time when the dying soldier uttered it, adding that this Lacheneur was an old comedian."

He heaved a deep sigh, and continued:

"Poor soldier! I had just dealt him his death-blow; and yet his last words testified to my innocence."

This sentimental outburst produced no impression whatever upon the magistrate.

"Consequently," resumed the judge, "you are willing to accept the deposition of this soldier?"

The man hesitated, as if conscious that he had fallen into a snare, and that he would be obliged to weigh each response carefully.

"I accept it," said he, at last. "Of course, I accept it."

"Very well. This soldier, you must recollect, wished to revenge himself upon Lacheneur, who, by promising him money, had inveigled him into a conspiracy. A conspiracy against whom? Evidently against you; and yet you pretend that you had only arrived in Paris that evening, and that the merest chance had alone brought you to the Poivrière. Can you reconcile such conflicting statements?"

The prisoner had the hardihood to shrug his shoulders, disdainfully.

"I see the matter in an entirely different light," said he. "These people were plotting mischief against—I do not know whom—and it was because I was in their way that they sought a quarrel with me, without any cause whatever."

The judge's sword-thrust had been skilfully made, but it had been as skilfully parried; so skilfully, indeed, that the smiling clerk could not conceal an approving grimace. Besides, on principle, he always took the part of the prisoner—in a very mild way, understand.

"Let us consider the circumstances that followed your arrest," resumed M. Segmuller. "Why did you refuse to answer all questions?"

A gleam of real or assumed resentment shone in the eyes of the prisoner.

"This examination," he growled, "will be quite sufficient to make a culprit out of an innocent man!"

"I advise you, in your own interest, to deport yourself properly. Those who arrested you observed that you were conversant with all the formalities, and with the rules of the prison."

"Ah! sir, have I not told you that I have been arrested and put in prison several times—always on account of my papers. I told you the truth, and consequently you should not taunt me."

He had dropped his mask of careless gayety, and had assumed a surly, discontented tone.

But his troubles were not ended, the battle had but just begun. M. Segmuller laid a tiny linen bag upon his desk.

"Do you recognize this?" he asked.

" Perfectly! It is the package that was placed in the safe by the keeper of the prison."

The judge opened the bag, and poured the dust that it contained out upon a sheet of paper.

" You are aware, prisoner," said he, " that this dust is from the mud that adhered to your feet. The agent of police who collected it went to the station-house where you had spent the preceding night, and he has discovered between this dust and the earth which forms the floor of the station-house a perfect uniformity."

The man listened with wide-open mouth.

" Hence," continued the judge, " it was certainly at the station-house, and *designedly,* that you soiled your feet in the mud. What was your object? "

" I wished——"

" Let me finish. Resolved to guard the secret of your identity, and to assume the individuality of a man of the lower orders of society—of a mountebank, if you please—you reflected that the delicacy of your appearance would betray you. You foresaw the impression that would be produced when, upon removing the coarse, ill-fitting boots that you wore, the officers saw shapely, nicely cared for feet like yours ; for they are as well kept as your hands. What did you do, therefore? You emptied upon the ground the water that was in the pitcher in your cell, and then dabbled your feet in the mud that had been formed."

During these remarks the face of the prisoner had expressed, by turns, anxiety, the most comical astonishment, irony, and at last a frank gayety.

At the conclusion, he seemed unable to restrain the burst of merriment which prevented him from making any reply.

" This is what one gets by searching around for

twelve or fourteen hours," he said, as soon as he could speak, and addressing not the judge, but Lecoq. "Ah! Mister Agent, it is well to be sharp, but not so sharp as that. The truth is, that when I was taken to the station-house, forty-eight hours—thirty-six of them spent on the railroad cars—had elapsed since I had taken off my shoes. My feet were red, swollen, and burned like fire. What did I do? I poured some water on them. As for your other suspicions, if I have a soft and white skin, it is only because I take care of myself. Besides, as is usual with most men in my profession, I never wear anything but slippers on my feet. This is so true, that on leaving Leipsic, I owned only one pair of boots, and that was an old cast-off pair given me by Monsieur Simpson."

Lecoq struck himself upon the breast. "Fool, imbecile, idiot, that I am!" he thought. "He was waiting to be questioned in regard to this circumstance. When this man, who is wonderfully shrewd, saw me take this dust, he divined my intentions; he has been seeking for an explanation, and he has found it—and it is a plausible one—any jury would believe it."

M. Segmuller was saying the same thing to himself. But he was not so surprised nor so overcome by the cleverness of the prisoner.

"Let us continue," said he. "Do you still persist in your affirmations, prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Very well; then I shall be forced to tell you that you are saying what is untrue."

The prisoner's lips trembled very visibly, and he faltered:

"May my first mouthful of bread strangle me, if I have uttered a single falsehood!"

"A single falsehood!—wait."

The judge took from his desk-drawer the moulds of the footprints, which Lecoq had made, and showing them to the murderer, he said:

"You have told me that these women were as tall as grenadiers; now see the footprints made by these immense women. They were as 'dark as moles,' you said; a witness will tell you that one of them was a small, very delicate blonde, with an exceedingly sweet voice."

He sought the prisoner's eyes, found them, and added slowly:

"And this witness is the coachman whose carriage was hired in the Rue de Chevaleret by the two fugitives."

This sentence fell upon the prisoner like a thunderbolt; he grew pale, tottered and leaned against the wall to keep himself from falling.

"Ah! you have told me the truth!" scornfully continued the pitiless judge. "Who, then, is this man who was waiting for you while you were in the Poivrière? Who is this accomplice who, after your arrest, dared to enter the Widow Chupin's hut to regain something compromising in its nature—a letter, undoubtedly—which he knew he would find in the pocket of the Widow Chupin's apron? Who is this devoted and courageous friend who feigned drunkenness so effectually that even the police were deceived, and placed him in confinement with you? Dare you deny that you have not arranged your system of defence in concert with him? Can you affirm that he did not give the Widow Chupin counsel as to the course she must pursue?"

But already, thanks to an almost superhuman effort, the man had mastered his agitation.

"All this," said he, in a harsh voice, "is a mere invention of the police!"

However faithfully one may describe an examination of this sort, it gives the reader no more idea of the scene than cold ashes give the effect of a glowing fire.

One can note down the slightest word; but one can never portray the repressed animation, the impassioned movements, the studied reticence, the intonation, the glances full of hatred and suspicion which encounter each other—in short, the terrible anguish of a mortal struggle.

When the prisoner reeled beneath the power of his accusation, the judge trembled with joy.

"He weakens," he thought, "he yields—he is mine!"

But all hope of immediate success vanished when he saw this redoubtable adversary struggle against his momentary weakness, and arm himself for the fight with a renewed and still more vigorous energy.

The judge comprehended that it would require more than one assault to overcome such a nature.

So, in a voice rendered still more harsh by disappointment, he resumed:

"Evidently you are determined to deny evidence itself."

The murderer had turned to bronze again. He must have bitterly regretted his weakness, for a fiendish audacity glittered in his eyes.

"What evidence!" he demanded, frowning. "This romance invented by the police is very plausible, I do not deny it; but it seems to me that the truth is quite as probable. You tell me of a coachman, who was employed by two small, fair-haired women—who can prove that those women are the same who fled from this accursed hovel?"

"The police officer followed their tracks upon the snow."

"At night, across fields cut every now and then by ditches, and up a long street, while a fine rain was falling and a thaw was beginning! That is very probable!"

He extended his arm toward Lecoq, and in a tone of crushing scorn, he added:

"A man must have great confidence in himself, or a wild longing for advancement, to ask that a man's head should be cut off on such evidence as this!"

While the smiling clerk made his pen fly across the paper, he said to himself:

"The arrow entered the bull's eye this time!"

The reproach did indeed seem just; and it cut Lecoq to the quick. He was so incensed, that forgetful of the place in which he was, he sprang up, furious.

"This circumstance would be of slight importance," said he, vehemently, "if it were not one of a long chain——"

"Silence!" interrupted the judge.

Then turning to the prisoner he said:

"The court does not use proofs and testimony collected by the police until it has examined and weighed them."

"No matter," murmured the man. "I would like to see this coachman."

"Have no fears; he shall repeat his deposition in your presence."

"Very well. I am satisfied then. I will ask him how he can distinguish people's faces when it is as dark as——"

He checked himself, enlightened apparently by a sudden inspiration.

"How stupid I am!" he exclaimed. "I lose my temper about these people while you know all the while who they are. For you know, do you not, since the coachman must of course have taken them to their homes."

M. Segmuller saw that the man understood him. He saw, too, that he was endeavoring to increase the shadow of doubt and uncertainty that overhung the very point upon which the prosecution was so anxious to obtain information.

An incomparable comedian, the man had uttered these words with an accent of the most sincere candor. But the irony was evident, and if he sneered, it was because he felt that he had nothing to fear from this quarter.

"If you are consistent," remarked the judge, "you will also deny the existence of an accomplice, of a—comrade."

"Of what use would it be to deny it, since you believe nothing that I say? You only a moment ago insinuated that my former employer was an imaginary personage; what shall I say of this pretended accomplice? Ah! the agents who invented him have made him indeed a faithful friend. Not content with escaping them once, he comes to place himself in their clutches for a second time. These gentlemen pretend that he conferred first with me, and afterward with the Widow Chupin. How did *that* happen? Perhaps, after they took him from the cell in which I was confined, they shut him up with the old woman."

Goquet the clerk wrote and admired.

"Here," he thought, "is a man of brain, who understands his case, and who will have no need of the eloquence of a lawyer in pleading his cause before a jury."

"And after all," continued the prisoner, "what are the proofs against me? The name Lacheneur, faltered by a dying man, some footprints upon the melting snow, the declaration of a coachman, a vague suspicion on the subject of a drunken man. Are these all? They do not amount to much——"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "Your assurance is great now, but your embarrassment a moment since was even greater. What was the cause of it?"

"The cause!" exclaimed the prisoner, in a sort of rage; "the cause! Can you not see, Monsieur, that you are torturing me frightfully, pitilessly? I am an innocent man, and you are trying to deprive me of my life. You have been turning me this way and that for so many hours, that I begin to feel as if I were standing on the guillotine; and at each word that I utter, I ask myself if this is the one that will make the axe fall upon my head. My anxiety and dismay surprise you, do they, when I have felt the cold knife graze my throat at least twenty times? I would not desire my worst enemy to be subjected to torture like this."

He was, indeed, suffering terribly. His hair was saturated with perspiration, and great drops of sweat stood out upon his cheeks and rolled from his pallid brow down upon his beard.

"I am not your enemy," said the judge, more gently. "A judge is neither the friend nor the enemy of a prisoner; he is simply the friend of truth and of the law. I am not seeking an innocent man or a culprit; I merely wish to arrive at the truth. I must know who you are—and I do know."

"Ah!—if the assertion costs me my life—I am May."

"No."

"Who am I, then? Some great man in disguise? Ah! I would that I were! In that case, I should have satisfactory papers. I would show them to you, and you would set me free, for you know very well, my good sir, that I am as innocent as yourself."

The judge had left his desk, and seated himself by the fireplace, only a couple of feet from the prisoner.

"Do not insist," said he.

Then suddenly changing both manner and tone, he added, with the urbanity that a man of the world displays when addressing an equal:

"Do me the honor, Monsieur, to believe me gifted with sufficient perspicuity to recognize, under the difficult *rôle* that you play to such perfection, a very superior gentleman—a man endowed with remarkable talent."

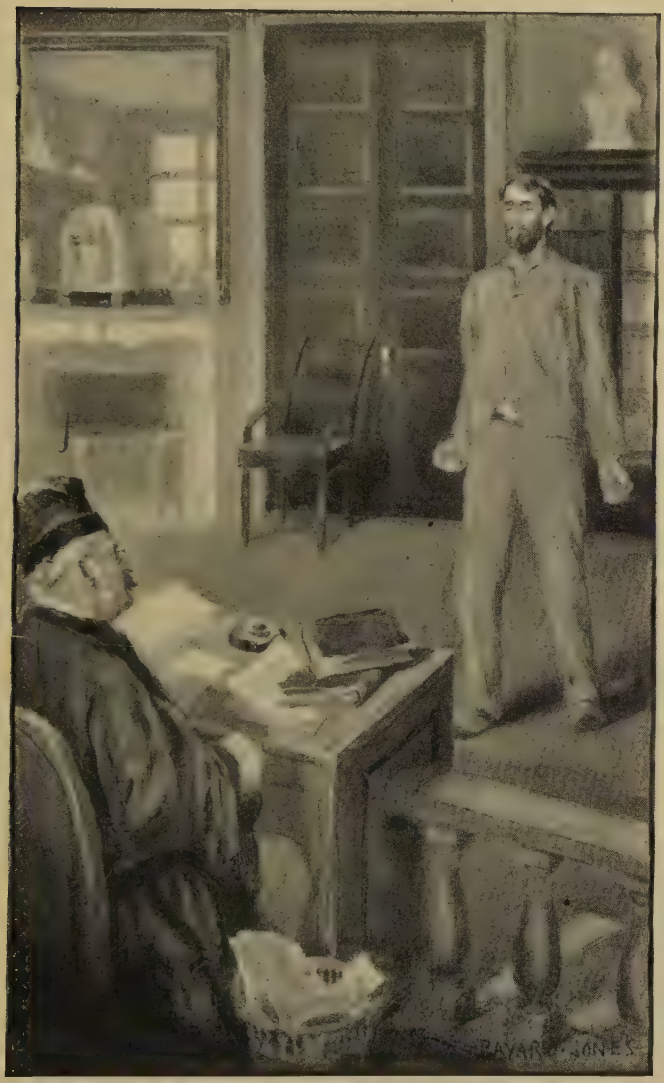
Lecoq saw that this sudden change of manner had unmanned the prisoner.

He tried to laugh, but the laugh died in his throat as mournful as a sob, and tears glittered in his eyes.

"I will not torture you any longer, Monsieur," continued the judge. "Upon this ground of subtle reasoning I confess that you have conquered me. When I return to the charge I shall have proofs enough in my possession to crush you."

He reflected for a moment, then slowly, and lingering over each word, he added:

"Only do not expect from me then the consideration I have shown you to-day. Justice is human, Monsieur; that is, she is indulgent to certain crimes. She has fathomed the depths of the abyss into which blind passion may hurl even an honest man. To-day, any assistance that will not conflict with my duty I freely offer to you. Speak, Monsieur. Shall I send away this



" Can you not see, monsieur, that you are torturing me frightfully, pitilessly? "

officer of police? Do you wish me to send my clerk out of the room upon some errand?"

He said no more. He wanted to see the effect of this last, this supreme effort.

The murderer darted upon him one of those glances that penetrate to the depths of one's inmost soul. His lips moved; one might have supposed that he was about to speak. But no; he crossed his arms upon his breast and murmured:

"You are very frank, Monsieur. Unfortunately for me. I am only a poor devil, as I have told you, May, artist—to speak to the public and turn a compliment."

"I am forced to yield to your decision," said the judge, sadly. "The clerk will now read the report of your examination—listen."

Goquet read the deposition.

The prisoner listened without making any remark, but when the reading was concluded he refused to sign the document, fearing, he said, "some hidden treachery."

A moment after, the soldiers who had brought him there, led him away.

CHAPTER XXII

When the prisoner had departed, M. Segmuller sank back in his arm-chair, weary, exhausted, and in that state of nervous prostration which so often follows protracted, but fruitless efforts.

He had scarcely strength to bathe his burning forehead and his glittering eyes in cool, refreshing water. This frightful scene had lasted for seven consecutive hours, at least.

The smiling clerk, who all the while had kept his place at his desk, busily writing, rose, glad of an opportunity to stretch his limbs and snap his fingers, cramped by holding the pen.

Still, he was not in the least bored. These dramas which had been unrolled in his presence for so many years, had never ceased to afford him a half-theatrical interest, increased by the uncertainty in which the *dénouement* was shrouded, and by the consciousness of some slight participation in the affair.

"What a knave!" he exclaimed, after vainly waiting some expression of opinion from the judge or from the detective; "what a rascal!"

Ordinarily, M. Segmuller accorded some degree of confidence to the long experience of his clerk. He sometimes even went so far as to consult him, doubtless somewhat in the same style that Molière consulted his servant.

But this time he did not accept his opinion.

"No," said he in a thoughtful tone, "that man is not a knave. When I spoke to him kindly he was really touched; he wept, he hesitated. I would have sworn that he was about to confide everything to me."

"Ah! he is a remarkable man—a man of wonderful power!" said Lecoq.

The detective was sincere in his praise. Although the prisoner had disappointed his plans, and had even insulted him, he could not help admiring his adversary's shrewdness and courage.

He had prepared himself to struggle with this man to the death—he hoped to conquer him. Nevertheless, in his secret soul Lecoq experienced that sympathy which a "foeman worthy of one's steel" always inspires.

"What coolness, what courage!" continued Lecoq. "Ah! there is no denying it, his system of defence—of absolute denial—is a *chef-d'œuvre*. It is perfect. And how admirably he sustained the different *rôle* of buffoon! Sometimes I could scarcely restrain my admiration. What are all these famous comedians beside him? The greatest actors need the aid of stage scenery to support the illusion. This man almost convinced me even against my reason."

"Do you know what your very just criticism proves?" inquired the judge.

"I am listening, Monsieur."

"Ah, well! I have arrived at this conclusion—either this man is really May, artist—for the paying of compliments, as he says—or he belongs to the highest rank of society; not to the middle classes. It is only in the lowest ranks or in the highest, that you encounter such grim energy as he has displayed, such scorn of life, as well as such remarkable presence of mind and resolution. A vulgar bourgeois attracted to the Poivrière by some shameful passion would have confessed it long ago."

"But, Monsieur, this man is not the buffoon, May," replied the young detective.

"No, certainly not," responded M. Segmuller; "we must, therefore, decide upon some plan of action."

He smiled kindly, and added, in a friendly voice:

"It was unnecessary to tell you that, Monsieur Lecoq. Quite unnecessary, since to you belongs the honor of having detected this fraud. As for me, I confess, that if I had not been warned in advance, I should at this moment be the dupe of this clever artist."

The young man bowed; a blush of modesty tinged his cheeks, but his pleased vanity sparkled in his eyes.

What a difference between this friendly and benevolent judge and that other, so taciturn and so haughty.

This man, at least, understood, appreciated, and encouraged him; and it was with a common theory and an equal ardor that they were about to devote themselves to a search for the truth.

These thoughts flitted through Lecoq's mind; then he reflected that his satisfaction was a trifle premature, and that success was still extremely doubtful.

This rather chilling thought restored his coolness.

"Monsieur, an idea has just occurred to me," he said, calmly.

"Let me hear it."

"The Widow Chupin, as you undoubtedly recollect, alluded to her son, a certain Polyte——"

"Yes."

"Why not question him? He must know all the *habitués* of the Poivrière, and would perhaps give us valuable information regarding Gustave, Lacheneur, and the murderer himself. As he is not in solitary confinement, he has probably heard of his mother's arrest; but it seems to me impossible that he should suspect our present perplexity."

"Ah! you are a hundred times right!" exclaimed the judge. "Why did I not think of that myself? To-morrow morning I will question this man, whose situation renders him less likely to have been tampered with than these parties. I will also question his wife."

He turned to his clerk and added:

"Quick, Goquet, prepare a summons in the name of the wife of Hippolyte Chupin, and address an order to the keeper of the depot for her husband!"

But night was coming on. It was already so dark that one could not see to write, and the clerk rang the

bell and asked for a light. Just as the messenger who had brought in the lamps was leaving the room, someone rapped. The door opened, and the keeper of the prison entered with his hat in his hand.

During the past twenty-four hours this worthy officer had been greatly exercised in mind on account of the mysterious prisoner whom he had placed in secret cell No. 3, and he came to the judge for advice.

"I come to ask if I am to retain the prisoner, May, in solitary confinement?"

"Yes."

"I fear his attacks of frenzy, still I dislike to confine him in the strait-jacket again."

"Leave him free in his cell," replied M. Segmuller, "and tell the keepers to treat him kindly, but yet to exercise a constant surveillance over him."

By the provisions of Article 613, although accused parties are confided to the authority of the government, the judge is allowed, previous to the trial, to adopt such measures concerning them as he may deem necessary for the interests of the prosecution.

The keeper bowed; then he added:

"You have doubtless succeeded in establishing the identity of this prisoner?"

"Unfortunately, I have not."

The keeper shook his head with a knowing air.

"In that case, my conjectures were correct," said he. "It seems to me more than sufficiently demonstrated that this man is a malefactor of the worst sort—an old offender certainly, and one who has the strongest interest in concealing his identity. You will find that you have to deal with a man who has been sentenced to the galleys for life, and who has managed to make his escape from Cayenne."

"Perhaps you are mistaken."

"Hum! I shall be greatly surprised if I discover that I am. I must admit that my opinion in this matter corresponds exactly with that of Monsieur Gevrol, the most experienced and the most skilful of our inspectors. I agree with him in thinking that young detectives are often over-zealous, and run after phantoms originated in their own brains."

Lecoq, crimson with wrath, was about to make an angry response, when M. Segmuller, with a gesture, imposed silence.

It was the judge who, with a smile, replied to the keeper.

"Upon my word, my dear friend," he said, "the more I study this affair, the more convinced I am of the correctness of the theory advanced by the 'too-zealous detective.' But, after all, I am not infallible, and I shall depend upon your counsel and assistance."

"Oh! I have means of verifying my assertion," interrupted the keeper; "and I hope before the end of the next twenty-four hours that our man will have been identified, either by the police or by some one of his fellow-prisoners."

With these words he took his leave, and Lecoq sprang up, furious.

"You see that this Gevrol already speaks ill of me; he is jealous."

"Ah, well! what does that matter to you? If you succeed, you will have your revenge. If you are mistaken—I am mistaken, too."

And then, as it was already late, M. Segmuller confided to Lecoq's keeping the articles which the latter had accumulated in support of his theory. He also placed in his hands the diamond ear-ring, whose owner

must be discovered, then the letter signed Lacheneur, which had been found in the pocket of the dead soldier.

He gave him several commissions, and, after requesting him to make his appearance promptly on the morrow, he dismissed him with these words:

"Now go; and good luck attend you!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Long, narrow, low of ceiling, and pierced by many small, numbered doors, like the corridor of a hotel, its sole furniture an immense oaken desk, blackened by age—such is the *galerie d'instruction* in the Palais de Justice.

Even in the daytime, when it is thronged with prisoners, witnesses, and guards, it is a sad and gloomy place.

But it is sinister of aspect at night, when deserted, and only dimly lighted by the smoking lamp of the doorkeeper, who is waiting for the departure of some judge whom business has detained later than usual.

Although Lecoq was not sensitive to such influences, he made haste to reach the staircase and escape the echo of his own steps, which resounded drearily in the silence and darkness that pervaded the corridor.

On the floor below a window was standing open, and the young man leaned out to ascertain the state of the weather.

The temperature was much milder; the snow had disappeared entirely, and the pavements were almost dry. A slight haze, illumined by the red glare of the street-lamps, hung like a purple mantle over the city.

The streets below were gay and animated; carriages were rolling rapidly to and fro, and the pavements were too narrow for the bustling crowd, which, now that the labors of the day were ended, was hastening in pursuit of its pleasures.

This spectacle drew a sigh from the young detective.

"And it is in this great city, in the midst of this world of people that I must discover the traces of an unknown person! Is it possible to do this?"

But this feeling of discouragement did not endure long.

"Yes, it is possible," cried an inward voice. "Besides, it *must* be done; your future depends upon it. What one wills, one can do."

Ten seconds later he was in the street, more than ever inflamed with hope and courage.

To act as the servants of boundless desires, man has, unfortunately, only organs of limited power. The young man had not advanced twenty steps before he realized the fact that his physical powers would not obey the command of his will. His limbs trembled; his head whirled. Nature asserted her rights; for two days and nights Lecoq had taken scarcely a moment's rest, and he had eaten nothing that day.

"Am I going to be ill?" he thought, sinking down upon a bench.

And he groaned inwardly, on recapitulating all that he wished to do that evening.

Must he not (to mention only the most important) ascertain the results of Father Absinthe's search after the man who had recognized one of the victims in the morgue; must he not verify in the hotels which surround the northern depot the assertions made by the prisoner; and last, but not least, must he not procure

the address of Polyte Chupin's wife, in order to serve the summons upon her?

Under the power of urgent necessity, he succeeded in triumphing over his weakness, and he rose, murmuring:

"I will go to the prefecture, and to the morgue; then I will see."

But he did not find Father Absinthe at the prefecture, and no one could give any tidings of him. The good man had not made his appearance there at all during the day.

Nor could anyone indicate, even vaguely, the abode of the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law.

But he met a number of his colleagues, who laughed and jeered at him unmercifully.

"Ah! you are a shrewd one!"—all whom he met said to him—"it seems that you have just made a wonderful discovery! They talk of decorating you with the cross."

Gevrol's influence betrayed itself everywhere. The angry inspector had taken pains to inform each newcomer that this poor Lecoq, crazed by ambition, persisted in declaring that a low, vulgar fugitive from justice was some great personage.

But these jeers had but little effect upon the young man. "He laughs best who laughs last," he muttered.

If he was restless and anxious as he walked up the Quai des Orfèvres, it was only because he could not explain the prolonged absence of Father Absinthe, and because he wondered if Gevrol, in his mad jealousy, would not attempt, in an underhand way, to entangle all the threads of this business still more.

At the morgue, he met with no better success. After ringing three or four times, one of the guard who came

to open the door informed him that the bodies had not been identified, and that the old policeman had not been seen since he left there early in the morning.

"This is a bad beginning," thought Lecoq. "I will go and get some dinner—that will, perhaps, change the luck; and I have certainly earned the bottle of good wine to which I intend to treat myself."

It was a happy thought. Some dinner and a couple of glasses of Bordeaux sent new courage and energy coursing through his veins. If he still felt weary, the sensation was greatly diminished when he left the restaurant with a cigar between his lips.

Just at that moment he longed for the carriage and the good horse of Father Papillon. Fortunately, a *fiacre* was passing; he hired it, and as the clock struck eight he alighted at the square near the Northern depot. He looked about a little first, then he began his search.

It must be understood that he did not present himself in his official capacity. That would be a sure way of learning nothing.

By brushing back his hair and turning up his coat collar, he made a very considerable alteration in his appearance; and it was with a very pronounced English accent that he asked information concerning a "foreign workman."

But vainly he employed all his address in questioning parties; everywhere he received the same response:

"We do not know such a person; we have not seen anyone answering this description."

Any other reply would have astonished Lecoq, so strongly persuaded was he that the prisoner had only related this incident of a trunk left at one of these hotels in order to give a semblance of truth to his narrative.

Still he continued his investigation. If he noted upon

his memorandum-book all the hotels he had visited, it was only because he wished to make sure of the discomfiture of the prisoner when they brought him here to prove the truth of his story.

At last he reached the Hôtel de Mariembourg, on the corner of the Rue de St. Quentin.

The house was modest in its proportions; but seemed respectable and well kept. Lecoq pushed open the glass doors, furnished with a spring bell, that opened into the vestibule, and entered the office—a neat room, brightly lighted.

There was a woman in the office. She was standing upon a chair, her face on a level with a large bird-cage, covered with a piece of black silk; and she was repeating three or four German words with great earnestness to the occupant of the cage.

She was so engrossed in this occupation that Lecoq was obliged to make considerable noise before he could attract her attention.

As she turned, he said:

"Ah! good-evening, Madame; you are much interested, I see, in teaching your parrot to talk."

"It is not a parrot that I have here," replied the woman, who had not yet descended from her perch; "it is a starling; I am trying to teach it to say in German: 'Have you breakfasted?'"

"What! can starlings talk?"

"As well as persons. Yes, Monsieur," said the woman, jumping down from her chair.

Just then the bird, as if it had understood the question, cried very distinctly:

"Camille! Where is Camille?"

But Lecoq was too anxious to bestow much attention upon the bird.

"Madame," he began, "I wish to speak to the proprietor of this hotel."

"I am the proprietor."

"Oh! very well. I was expecting a mechanic—from Leipsic, to meet me here in Paris. To my great surprise, he has not made his appearance; and I came to inquire if he was stopping here? His name is May."

"May!" repeated the hostess, thoughtfully. "May!"

"He ought to have arrived last Sunday evening."

The woman's face brightened.

"Wait a moment," said she. "Was this friend a middle-aged man, of medium size, of very dark complexion—wearing a full beard, and having very bright eyes?"

Lecoq trembled. This was a perfect description of the murderer.

"Yes," he stammered, "that is a very good portrait of the man."

"Ah, well! Monsieur, he came here on the afternoon of Shrove Sunday. He asked for a cheap room, and I showed him one on the fifth floor. The office-boy was not here at the time, and he insisted upon taking his trunk upstairs himself. I offered him some refreshments; but he declined to take anything, on account of his being in a great hurry; and he went away after giving me ten francs as security for his room-rent."

"Where is he?" inquired the young detective.

"*Mon Dieu!* Monsieur, that reminds me," replied the woman. "This man has not returned, and I have been very anxious about him. Paris is such a dangerous place for strangers! It is true he spoke French as well as you or I; but what of that? Last evening I gave orders that the commissioner of police should be informed of the matter."

"Yesterday—the commissioner!"

"Yes. Still I do not know whether the boy did the errand. I had forgotten all about it. Allow me to ring for the boy, and ask him."

A bucket of ice-water falling upon the head of the detective, could not have astonished him more than this announcement from the proprietress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg.

Had the murderer indeed told the truth? Could it be possible? Gevrol and the keeper of the prison were right, then! And M. Segmuller and he, Lecoq, were senseless fools, pursuing a phantom.

All this flashed like lightning through the brain of the detective.

But he had no time for reflection. The boy who had been summoned made his appearance—a big, overgrown boy—with a frank, chubby face.

"Fritz," demanded his mistress, "did you go to the office of the commissioner?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What did he say?"

"He was not in; but I spoke to his secretary, Monsieur Casimir, who told me to tell you not to worry yourself, that the man would return."

"He has not returned."

The boy raised his arms, with that movement of the shoulders which is the most eloquent translation of that response:

"What would you have me do about it?"

"You hear, sir," said the hostess, apparently thinking the importunate questioner would withdraw.

Such, however, was not the intention of Lecoq, and he did not move, though he had need of all his self-possession to retain his English accent.

"This is very annoying," said he, "very! I am even more anxious and undecided than I was before, since I am not certain that this is the man I am seeking."

"But, sir, what more can I tell you?"

Lecoq reflected for a moment, knitting his brows and biting his lips, as if he were trying to invent some means of solving the mystery.

The fact is, he was seeking some adroit circumlocution by which he could propose that this woman should show him the register in which all guests are compelled to inscribe their full names, their profession, and their residence; but he feared to arouse her suspicions.

"But, Madame, can you not remember the name which this man gave you? Was it May? Try to recollect if that was the name—May—May!"

"Ah! I have so many things to remember."

"It would be a great convenience if each guest were required to inscribe his name in a register, as is the custom in England."

"But they do register," replied the woman. "I have a book for that purpose, in which a whole column is allotted to each guest. And now I think of it; I could, if it would oblige you, show you my book. It is there, in the drawer of my secretary. Well, now! what can I have done with my key?"

And while the hostess, who seemed to possess but little more intelligence than her bird, was turning the whole office upside down in her search for the key, Lecoq scrutinized her closely.

She was about forty years of age, with an abundance of light hair, and a very fair complexion. She was well preserved—that is to say—she was plump and healthy in appearance; her glance was frank and unembar-

rassed; her voice was clear and musical, and her manners were pleasing, and entirely free from affectation.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "I have found the miserable key at last."

She opened her desk, took out the register, which she laid upon the table, and began turning over the leaves.

At last she found the desired page.

"Sunday, February 20th," said she. "Look, Monsieur: here on the seventh line—May—no Christian name—foreign artist—coming from Leipsic—without papers."

While Lecoq was examining this record with a dazed air, the woman exclaimed:

"Ah! now I can explain how it happened that I forgot this name—May, and this strange profession—foreign artist. I did not write it myself."

"Who did write it, then?"

"The man himself, while I was finding ten francs to give him as change for the louis he handed me. You can see that the writing is not at all like that in which the names above and below are recorded."

Yes, Lecoq had observed that fact; and it was an irrefutable argument, as sure and as strong as a blow from a cudgel.

"Are you sure," he insisted, "that this record is in the man's handwriting; would you swear it?"

In his anxiety, he had forgotten his foreign accent. The woman noticed this at once, for she drew back and cast a suspicious glance at the pretended stranger. Then defiance and anger at having been duped seemed to take possession of her.

"I know what I am saying," she said, indignantly. "And now this is enough, is it not?"

Knowing that he had betrayed himself, and thoroughly ashamed of his lack of coolness, Lecoq renounced his English accent altogether.

"Pardon me," he said, "if I ask one more question. Have you this man's trunk in your possession?"

"Certainly."

"Ah! you would do me an immense service by showing it to me."

"Show it to you!" exclaimed the fair-haired hostess, angrily. "What do you take me for? What do you want? and who are you?"

"In a half hour you shall know," replied the detective, realizing that further persuasion would be useless.

He hastily left the room, ran to the Place de Robaux, leaped into a carriage, and giving the driver the address of the commissioner of police for that district, promised him a hundred sous over and above the regular fare if he would make haste. As might have been expected under such circumstances, the poor horses fairly flew under the stroke of the whip.

Lecoq was fortunate enough to find the commissioner at home. The detective made known his business, and was immediately ushered into the presence of the magistrate.

"Ah! sir," he cried, "will you assist me?"

And in a breath he told his story.

When it was concluded:

"It is really true that they came to inform me of this man's disappearance," said the judge. "Casimir told me about it this morning."

"They—came—to inform—you—" faltered Lecoq.

"Yes, yesterday; but I have had so much to occupy my time. Now, my boy, how can I serve you?"

"Come with me, sir; compel them to show us the

trunk, and send for a locksmith to open it. Here is the authority—a search-warrant given me by the judge to use in case of necessity. Let us lose no time. I have a carriage at the door."

"We will start at once," said the commissioner.

When they had entered the *fiacre,* which started off at a gallop:

"Now, sir," said the young detective, "permit me to ask if you know this woman who keeps the Hôtel de Mariembourg?"

"Yes, indeed, I know her very well. When I was first appointed to this district, six years ago, I was not married, and for a long time I took my meals at this lady's *table d'hôte.* Casimir, my secretary, boards there yet."

"And what kind of a woman is she?"

"Why, upon my word, my young friend, Madame Milner—for such is her name—is a very respectable widow (esteemed and much beloved in this neighborhood), who has a very prosperous business, and who remains a widow only from choice, for she is extremely agreeable, and has plenty of suitors."

"Then you do not think her capable, for the sake of a good round sum, of—what shall I say?—of serving some very rich culprit——"

"Have you gone mad?" interrupted the commissioner. "Madame Milner consent to testify falsely for the sake of money. Have I not just told you that she is an honest woman, and that she has a very comfortable fortune? Besides, she informed me yesterday that this man was missing, so——"

Lecoq made no reply; they had reached their destination.

On seeing her obstinate questioner reappear, accom-

panied by the commissioner, Mme. Milner seemed to understand it all.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed, "a detective! I might have known it! Some crime has been committed; and now my hotel has lost its reputation forever!"

It took quite a long time to reassure and to console her; all the time that was required to find a locksmith.

At last they went up to the room of the missing man, and Lecoq sprang to the trunk.

Ah! there was no denying it. It had, indeed, come from Leipsic; the little slips of paper pasted upon it by the different railroad companies proved it.

They opened it and found the articles mentioned by the prisoner.

Lecoq was petrified. With an almost stupefied air he watched the commissioner as he locked everything up in a cupboard and took possession of the key; then he felt that he could endure no more. He left the room with downcast head; and they heard him stumble like a drunken man as he descended the stairs.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mardi Gras, or Shrove Tuesday, was very gay that year; that is to say: the pawnbrokers' shops and the public halls were crowded.

When Lecoq left the Hôtel de Mariembourg about midnight, the streets were as full as if it were noonday, and the *cafés* were thronged with customers.

But the young man had no heart for gayety. He mingled with the crowd without seeing it, and jostled groups of people chatting on the corners, without hearing the imprecations occasioned by his awkwardness.

Where was he going! He had no idea. He walked on aimlessly, more inconsolable and desperate than the gambler who has staked his last hope with his last louis and lost.

"I must yield," he murmured; "this evidence is conclusive. My presumptions were only chimeras; my deductions, the playthings of chance! There only remains for me now to withdraw, with the least possible damage and ridicule, from the false position I have assumed."

Just as he reached the boulevard, a new idea entered his brain, startling him so much that he could scarcely restrain a cry.

"I am a fool," he exclaimed, striking his hand violently against his forehead.

"Is it possible," he continued, "that I am so strong in theory, yet so ridiculously weak in practice? Ah! I am only a child, yet a novice, disheartened by the slightest obstacle. I meet some difficulty. I lose courage and even the power to reason.

"Now, let me reflect calmly.

"What did I tell the judge about this man, whose plan of defence so puzzles us?

"Did I not tell him that we had to deal with a man of superior talent—with a man of consummate penetration, and experience—a bold, courageous man, who possesses an imperturbable coolness, and who will do anything to insure the success of his plans?

"Yes; I told him all this, and yet I give up in despair as soon as I meet a single circumstance that I cannot explain at once.

"It is evident, then, that this prisoner would not be likely to resort to old and hackneyed methods, and commonplace expedients. Ought I not to expect that it

would require time, patience, and research to find a flaw in his defence?

"Consequently, the more appearances are against my presumptions, and in favor of the story told by the prisoner, the more certain it is that I am right—or logic is no longer logic."

The young man burst into a hearty laugh, and added:

"But to expose this theory at head-quarters before Gevrol would perhaps be premature, and would win me a certificate entitling me to admission into the lunatic asylum."

He paused; he had reached his lodgings. He rang the bell; someone opened the door.

He groped his way slowly up to the fourth floor; he reached his room, and was about to enter, when a voice in the darkness called out:

"Is that you, Monsieur Lecoq?"

"It is I," replied the young man, somewhat surprised; "but who are you?"

"I am Father Absinthe."

"Upon my word! Well, you are welcome! I did not recognize your voice—will you come in?"

They entered, and Lecoq lit a candle. Then the young man could see his colleague, and, good heavens! what a condition he was in!

He was as dirty and spattered with mud as a lost dog which has been wandering about in the rain and mire for three or four days. His overcoat bore traces of frequent contact with damp walls; his hat had lost its form entirely. His eyes were anxious; his mustache drooped despondently. He mumbled his words as if his mouth were full of sand.

"Do you bring me bad news?" inquired Lecoq, after a short examination of his companion.

"Bad."

"The people you were following escaped you, then?"

The old man nodded his head in the affirmative.

"It is unfortunate—very unfortunate!" said Lecoq. "But it is useless to distress ourselves about it. Do not be so cast down, Father Absinthe. To-morrow, between us, we will repair the damages."

This friendly encouragement redoubled the old man's evident embarrassment. He flushed, this veteran, like a school-girl, and raising his hands toward heaven, he exclaimed:

"Ah, wretch! did I not tell you so?"

"Why! what is the matter with you?" inquired Lecoq.

Father Absinthe made no reply; he approached the mirror and began heaping the most cruel insults upon the reflection of his features therein.

"Old good-for-nothing!" he exclaimed. "Vile soldier! have you no shame left? You were intrusted with a mission, were you not? And how have you fulfilled it? You have drank, wretch, until you drank away your senses like an old sot, as you are. This shall not be passed over thus; and even if Monsieur Lecoq forgives me, you shall not taste another drop for a week. You shall suffer for this escapade."

"Come, come," said Lecoq, "you can sermonize by-and-by. Now tell me your story."

"Ah! I am not proud of it. I beg you to believe that; but never mind. Doubtless you received the letter in which I told you that I was going to follow the young men who seemed to recognize Gustave?"

"Yes, yes—go on!"

"Well, as soon as they entered the *café*, into which I had followed them, the young men began drinking,

probably to drive away their emotion. After drinking, hunger apparently seized them, for they ordered breakfast. In my corner I followed their example. The repast, the coffee and beer all took time. Two hours elapsed before they were ready to pay their bill and go. Good! I supposed they would now return to their homes—not at all. They walked down the Rue Dauphin; and I saw them enter a coffee-house or smoking-room. Five minutes later I glided in after them; they were already engaged in a game of billiards."

He hesitated; it was not easy to tell the rest of his story.

"I seated myself at a little table, and asked for a newspaper. I was reading with one eye, and watching them with the other, when a worthy bourgeois entered, and took a seat beside me. As soon as he had seated himself he asked me to give him the paper when I had finished reading it. I handed it to him, and then we began talking of the weather. At last he proposed a game of bezique. I declined, and we afterward compromised on a game of piquet. The young men, you understand, were still knocking the balls about. We began playing, the stakes, a glass of brandy for each. I won. The bourgeois demanded his revenge, and we played two more games. Still I won. He insisted upon another game, and again I won, and still I drank —and drank again——"

"Go on, go on."

"Ah, here is the rub. After that I can remember nothing—neither of the bourgeois nor of the young men. It seems to me, however, that I recollect falling asleep in the *café,* and a waiter coming to wake me and tell me to go. Then I must have wandered about on the quays

until I came to my senses, and decided to come and wait upon your stairs until you returned."

To the great surprise of Father Absinthe, Lecoq seemed rather thoughtful than angry.

"What do you think about this bourgeois, papa?" inquired Lecoq.

"I think that he was following me while I was following the others, and that he entered the *café* with the intention of getting me intoxicated."

"Give me a description of him."

"He was a tall and rather stout man, with a broad, red face, a flat nose; and he was very unpretending and affable in manner."

"It was he!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"He! Who?"

"The accomplice—the man whose footprints we discovered—the pretended drunkard—a devil incarnate, who will get the best of us yet, if we do not keep our eyes open. Do not forget him, papa; and if you ever meet him again——"

But Father Absinthe's confession was not ended. Like most devotees, he had reserved the worst sin for the last.

"This is not all," he resumed; "and I wish to conceal nothing from you. It seems to me that this traitor talked with me about the affair at the Poivrière, and that I told him all that we had discovered, and all that we intended to do."

Lecoq made such a threatening gesture that the old man drew back in consternation.

"Wretched man!" he exclaimed, "to betray our plans to the enemy!"

But he soon regained his calmness. At first the evil seemed to be beyond remedy; then he discovered that

it had a good side, after all. It removed all the doubts he had felt after his visit to the Hôtel de Mariembourg.

"But this is not the time for deliberation," resumed the young detective. "I am overcome with fatigue; take a mattress from the bed for yourself, my friend, and let us go to rest."

CHAPTER XXV

Lecoq was a thoughtful man. Before going to bed he took good care to wind an alarm-clock that stood in his room, setting the alarm at six o'clock.

"So that we shall not miss the coach," he remarked to his companion, as he blew out the candle.

But he had not made allowance for his extreme weariness, and for the fumes of alcohol with which his friend's breath was redolent.

When the clock of Saint Eustache pealed forth the hour of six the alarm-clock performed its duty faithfully; but the shrill sound of the ingenious mechanism was not sufficiently loud to disturb the heavy sleep of the two men.

They would probably have slept some time longer, if, at half-past seven o'clock, two vigorous blows of the fist had not resounded on their door.

With one bound Lecoq was out of bed, amazed at seeing the bright sunlight, and furious at the uselessness of his precautions.

"Come in!" he cried to his early visitor.

The young detective had no enemies at that time, and he could, without danger, sleep with his door unlocked.

The door opened, and the shrewd face of Father Papillon appeared.

"Ah! it is my worthy coachman!" exclaimed Lecoq. "Is there anything new?"

"Excuse me, friend; it is the old cause that brings me here. You know—the thirty francs those wretched women paid me—I shall not sleep in peace till I have carried you free, until your regular fare would be equal to that amount. You made use of my carriage yesterday, one hundred sous' worth, and so I still owe you twenty-five francs' worth of riding."

"This is all nonsense, my friend!"

"Possibly; but I am responsible for it. I have sworn if you will not use my carriage to station myself and my vehicle before your door for eleven hours. At two francs and twenty-five centimes an hour, eleven hours would release me from my indebtedness. We should be even. Now, make up your mind."

He gazed at Lecoq beseechingly; it was evident that a refusal would wound him keenly.

"Very well," replied Lecoq; "I will take your carriage for the morning, only I ought to warn you that we are starting on a long journey."

"Cocotle's legs may be relied upon."

"My companion and myself have business in your quarter of the city. It is absolutely necessary for us to find the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law; and I hope we shall be able to obtain her address from the commissioner of that district."

"Very well, we will go wherever you wish; I am at your orders."

A few moments later they were on their way.

Papillon, proudly erect upon his box, cracked his whip; and the vehicle tore along as rapidly as if the driver had been promised a hundred sous as *pourboire*.

Father Absinthe alone was sad. He had been for-

given, but he could not forgive himself that he, an old policeman, should have been duped like some ignorant provincial. If only he had not confided the secret plans of the prosecution!

He knew but too well that by this act he had increased the difficulties of their task twofold.

Their long drive was not fruitless. The secretary of the commissioner of police for the thirteenth district informed Lecoq that the wife of Polyte Chupin, with her child, lived in the suburbs, in the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles. He could not tell the precise number; but he described the house, and gave them some information concerning its occupants.

The Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law was a native of Auvergne; and she had been bitterly punished for preferring a Parisian to a compatriot.

She came to Paris when about twelve years of age, and obtained employment in a large factory. At the end of ten years of privation and constant toil, she had amassed, penny by penny, the sum of three thousand francs. Then her evil genius threw Polyte Chupin in her path.

She fell in love with this dissipated and selfish rascal; and he married her for her little hoard.

As long as the money lasted, that is, for about three or four months, everything went on pleasantly. But as soon as the last shilling was gone, Polyte left her, and, with delight, resumed his former life of idleness, thieving, and debauchery.

After this he returned to his wife, only in order to steal from her, when he suspected that she had saved a little money. And, periodically, she uncomplainingly allowed him to despoil her of the last penny of her earnings.

He wished to degrade her still more, for he hungered even for the price of her shame; but she resisted.

By this resistance, she had excited the hatred of the old Widow Chupin—hatred which manifested itself in such ill-treatment that the poor woman was forced to flee one night, with only the rags that covered her.

The mother and the son believed, perhaps, that starvation would effect what their threats and counsel had failed to accomplish.

Their shameful expectations had not been gratified.

The secretary added that these facts had become widely known, and that everybody did justice to the worth of the brave woman.

Hence the sobriquet which had been given her—Toinon, the virtuous—a rather coarse, but sincere tribute to her worth.

Grateful for this information, Lecoq re-entered the carriage.

The Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, to which Papillon was rapidly conducting them, did not bear much resemblance to the Boulevard Maxelherbes. Was it the abode of millionnaires? One would not suppose it. One thing is certain, however: all the inhabitants knew one another as they do in a village, and the first person of whom Lecoq asked information concerning Mme. Polyte Chupin, relieved him of all embarrassment.

"Toinon, the virtuous, lives in that house on the right," was the answer; "on the upper floor, the door facing you."

The directions were so precise that Lecoq and Father Absinthe went straight to the room they were seeking.

It was a cold and gloomy attic room, of medium size, and lighted by a small skylight.

A pallet of straw, a broken table, two chairs, and a few plain kitchen utensils, formed the sole furniture of the apartment.

But, in spite of the evident poverty, everything shone with neatness; and one could have eaten off the floor, to use Father Absinthe's forcible expression.

The two officers entered, and found a woman engaged in making heavy linen sacks. She was seated in the centre of the room, directly under the window, so that the light would fall upon her work.

At the sight of two strangers, she half rose, surprised, and perhaps a little frightened; but when they explained that they desired a few moments' conversation with her, she gave up her own seat, to offer it to them.

But Father Absinthe insisted that she should sit down again, and he remained standing, while Lecoq took possession of the other chair.

In a single glance Lecoq took an inventory of the humble abode, and, so to speak, appraised the woman.

She was short, stout, and extremely ordinary in appearance. A forest of coarse, black hair, growing very low on the forehead, and large black eyes set very close together, imparted to her countenance something of the patient resignation one sees in the faces of ill-treated animals.

Possibly, in former days, she had possessed what we called the beauty *du diable;* but now she looked almost as old as her mother-in-law.

Sorrow and privation, excessive toil, nights spent in labor, tears and the blows she had received, had made her complexion livid—had reddened her eyes and made deep furrows about her temples.

Still her whole person exhaled a perfume of native

honesty which had not been tainted, even by the foul atmosphere in which she had lived.

Her child did not resemble her in the least. He was pale and puny in appearance; his eyes burned with a phosphorescent brilliancy; and his hair was of that faded yellow tint that they call blonde in Paris.

One little circumstance attracted the attention of both officers.

The mother was attired in a very old and faded calico dress; but the child was warmly clad in warm woollen material.

"Madame, you have doubtless heard of a great crime, committed in your mother-in-law's establishment," began Lecoq, gently.

"Alas! yes, Monsieur."

Then she quickly added:

"But my husband could not have been implicated in it, since he is in prison."

Did not this objection, which preceded suspicion, betray the most horrible apprehensions?

"Yes, I am aware of that," replied her visitor. "Polyte was arrested a fortnight ago——"

"Yes, and very unjustly, Monsieur. I could swear it. He was, as is often the case, led astray by his companions, wicked, desperate men. He is so weak when he has taken a glass of wine, they can do whatsoever they will with him. If he were only left to himself, he would not harm a child. One has only to look at him——"

As she spoke she turned her red and swollen eyes to a miserable photograph hanging upon the wall. The picture represented a frightfully ugly, dissipated-looking young man, with a terrible squint, a repulsive mouth, only partially concealed by a faint mustache,

and his hair carefully plastered down about the temples. This was Polyte.

Yet there was no mistaking the fact that this unfortunate woman loved him—had always loved him; besides, he was her husband.

A moment's silence followed this act, which revealed the existence of passion so clearly; and during this silence the door of the room was opened softly.

A man put in his head and withdrew it instantly, with a low exclamation. Then the door closed again, the key grated in the lock, and they heard hurried steps descending the staircase.

Lecoq was sitting with his back to the door, and could not see the face of the visitor.

And yet he had turned so quickly at the sound, and he understood the whole affair so well that he was not surprised at all.

Indeed, he did not feel the shadow of a doubt.

"It is he, the accomplice!" he cried.

Thanks to his position, Father Absinthe had seen the man's face.

"Yes," said he, "yes, I recognize the man who made me drink with him yesterday."

With a bound the two men threw themselves against the door, exhausting their strength in vain efforts to open it. It resisted all their attempts, for it was of solid oak, having been purchased by the proprietor of the house from some one of the public buildings in process of demolition, and it was furnished with a strong and massive fastening.

"Help us!" cried Father Absinthe to the woman, who stood petrified with astonishment; "give us an iron bar, a piece of iron, a nail—anything!"

The younger man was making frantic efforts to push

back the bolt, or to tear the lock from the wood. He was wild with rage.

At last they succeeded in forcing it open, and the two men, animated by an equal ardor, dashed out in pursuit of their mysterious adversary.

When they reached the street, they made inquiries of the bystanders. They could give a description of the man, and that was something. Two persons had seen him enter the house of Toinon, the virtuous; a third had seen him when he ran out. Some children who were playing on the street assured them that this individual had run in the direction of the Rue du Moulin-des-Pres as fast as his legs could carry him.

It was in this street, near the corner of the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, that Lecoq had ordered his coachman to stop.

"Let us hasten there!" proposed Father Absinthe; "perhaps Papillon can give us some information."

But his companion shook his head despondently, and would go no further.

"What good would it do?" he asked. "The presence of mind that made this man think to turn the key, has saved him. He is at least ten minutes in advance of us; by this time he is far away, and we should not overtake him."

Father Absinthe was livid with anger. He now regarded as a personal enemy this adroit accomplice who had so cruelly duped him; and he would have given a month's pay to be able to lay his hand on the man's collar.

"Ah! this brigand does not lack assurance," said he. "To think how he defies and mocks us; and how for the third time he has escaped us. Three times!"

The young detective was at least as angry as his com-

panion—and his vanity was wounded besides; but he felt the necessity of coolness and deliberation.

"Yes," he replied, thoughtfully, "the man is daring and shrewd; and he does not sit down with folded arms. If we are working, he also is bestirring himself. The demon is everywhere. On whichever side I make an attack, I find him on the defensive. It was he, my friend, who made you lose the clew to Gustave's identity; it was he who arranged that little comedy at the Hôtel du Mariembourg."

"And now," remarked his companion, "now let the general come and tell us that we are chasing phantoms."

This flattery, delicate as it was, did not divert Lecoq's attention from the matter under consideration.

"Until now, this man has been in advance of us everywhere; this fact explains the failures that have attended all my efforts. Here, we arrived before him. But if he came here, it was because he scented danger. Therefore, we may hope. Let us return to the wife of this rascal, Polyte."

Alas! poor Toinon, the virtuous, did not understand this affair. She had remained upstairs, holding her child by the hand, and leaning over the bannister, her eyes and her ears on the *qui vive*.

As soon as she perceived the two men leisurely ascending the stairs, she came to meet them.

"In the name of Heaven, what does all this mean?" she exclaimed. "What has happened?"

But Lecoq was not the man to tell his affairs in a corridor, tapestried, perhaps, with listening and curious ears, and it was not until he had made Toinon enter her own apartment and close the door securely, that he answered her.

"We started in pursuit of an accomplice to the murders at the Poivrière. He came in, hoping to find you alone, but our presence frightened him."

"An assassin!" faltered Toinon, with clasped hands. "What could he want of me?"

"Who can say? It is very probable that he is one of your husband's friends."

"Oh! Monsieur."

"What, did you not tell me just now that Polyte had some very undesirable acquaintance? But do not be alarmed; this does not compromise him in the least. Besides, you can very easily clear him of all suspicion."

"How? In what way? Oh, tell me at once."

"Merely by answering me frankly, and by assisting me—you, who are an honest woman—to find the guilty party. Among all the friends of your husband, do you know of none capable of such a deed? Give me the names of his acquaintances."

The poor woman's hesitation was evident; undoubtedly she had been present at many sinister cabals, and had been threatened with terrible punishment if she dared to disclose their plans.

"You have nothing to fear," said Lecoq, encouragingly, "and never, I promise you, shall anyone know that you have told me a word. And very probably you can tell me nothing that I do not know now. I have heard much of your life already, to say nothing of the brutality with which you have been treated by Polyte and his mother.

"My husband, sir, has never treated me brutally," said the young woman, indignantly; "besides, that is something which concerns only myself."

"And your mother-in-law?"

"She is, perhaps, a trifle quick-tempered; but, in reality, she has a very good heart."

"Then why did you flee from the Widow Chupin's house, if you were so very happy there?"

Toinon, the virtuous, turned scarlet to the very roots of her hair.

"I left there for other reasons," she responded. "There were always a great many intoxicated men about the house; and, sometimes, when I was alone, some of them wished to carry their pleasantry too far. You will probably say that I have a very solid fist, and that I am quite capable of protecting myself. That is true, so I could, perhaps, have borne it. But when I was away, some of them were wicked enough to make this child drink to such an excess that on my return I found him as stiff and cold as if he were dead. It was necessary to call a physician to restore him——"

She suddenly paused; her eyes dilated. From red she turned livid, and in a choked, unnatural voice, she cried:

"Toto! wretched child!"

Lecoq looked behind him, and shuddered. He understood it all. This child who was not yet five years old, had stolen up behind him and was ferreting in the pockets of his overcoat, had plundered them, had rifled them of their contents.

"Ah, well—yes!" exclaimed the unfortunate mother, bursting into tears. "It was always so over there. As soon as the child was out of my sight, they took him to the city. They carried him into the crowded streets, and they taught him to pick people's pockets, and to bring them all he could find. If he was detected they were angry with the child, and beat him. If he succeeded they gave him a sou to buy candy, and kept what he had taken."

She hid her face in her hands, and in an almost unintelligible voice she sobbed:

"And I did not wish my little one to be a thief!"

But what this poor creature did not tell was that he who had led the child out into the streets, to teach him to steal, was its own father, and her husband, Polyte Chupin. But the two men understood this perfectly; and so horrible was the man's crime, and so despairing the grief of the woman, that they were touched in the very depths of their souls.

After that, Lecoq's only thought was to shorten the painful scene as much as possible. Besides, the poor mother's emotion was a sufficient guarantee of her sincerity.

"Listen," said he, with affected harshness; "two questions only, and then I will leave you. Among the *habitués* of the establishment was there a man by the name of Gustave?"

"No, sir; I am very sure there was not."

"Very well. But Lacheneur—you must know Lacheneur!"

"Yes, sir; I know him."

The young policeman could not repress an exclamation of delight. He thought that he at least held an end of the thread that would lead him to the light—to the truth.

"Who is this man?" he inquired, with intense anxiety.

"Oh! he is not at all like the other men who come to drink at my mother-in-law's saloon. I have seen him only once; but I remember him perfectly. It was on Sunday. He was in a carriage. He stopped near the unoccupied ground and spoke to Polyte. When he went away my husband said to me: 'Do you see that old man

there? he will make our fortune.' I thought him a very respectable-looking gentleman——"

"That is enough," interrupted Lecoq. "Now it is necessary for you to appear before the judge and make your deposition. I have a carriage below. Take your child with you, if you wish; but make haste; come quickly—come!"

CHAPTER XXVI

M. Segmuller was one of those magistrates who cherish their profession with an undivided love, who give themselves to it, body and soul, devoting to it all the energy, intelligence, and sagacity of which they are possessed.

As a judge, he displayed, in the search after truth, the tenacity and zeal of a physician struggling against some unknown disease—the enthusiasm of the artist who is wearing out his very life in his devotion to the beautiful.

Hence, it is easy to understand how deeply he had become interested in this mysterious case which had been confided to him.

He found in it all the elements that cannot fail to awaken intense interest. The magnitude of the crime, the peculiar circumstances attending it, the impenetrable mystery that enshrouded the victims and the murderer, the strange attitude assumed by the prisoner, all served to make a profound impression upon his mind.

The romantic element was not lacking, furnished by the two women, all traces of whom had been lost.

The extreme uncertainty of the result was another attraction. Self-love never loses its rights; and M.

Segmuller felt that success would be honorable in proportion to the magnitude of the difficulties to be overcome. And assisted by such a man as Lecoq, in whom he had recognized a most valuable auxiliary, and a man with a positive genius for his calling, he felt quite confident of success.

Even after the fatiguing labors of the day he did not think of freeing himself from the burden of his responsibility, or of driving away care until the morrow.

He ate his dinner hurriedly, and as soon as he had swallowed his coffee began to study the case with renewed ardor.

He had brought with him from his office a copy of the prisoner's deposition; and he went over it again and again, seeking some weak spot that might be attacked with a probability of success.

He analyzed each answer, and weighed one expression after another. He sought some flaw in the armor through which he could slip a question, which would rend the whole structure of defence in pieces, like a train of gunpowder.

The greater part of the night was spent in this work; but that did not prevent him from rising long before his usual hour.

By eight o'clock he was dressed, and shaved, had arranged his papers, taken his cup of chocolate, and was on his way to the palace.

He quite forgot that the impatience, which possessed him, was not boiling in the veins of others. But he soon discovered that fact.

The Palais de Justice was scarcely awake when he arrived there. All the doors had not been opened. In the corridors some of the door-keepers and a crowd of

sleepy office-boys were changing their ordinary clothing for their official costumes.

Others, in their shirt-sleeves, were vigorously sweeping and dusting the various rooms. Others were standing at the windows of the dressing-room shaking and brushing the long black robes of the lawyers. In the court-room some clerks were chaffing each other, while they awaited the coming of the chief clerk, and the opening of the bureaus of information.

M. Segmuller went to consult the attorney-general; or the *procureur imperial*, as he is called in France, but his office was empty. No one had, as yet, arrived.

Angry and impatient, he returned to his own office; and with his eyes fastened upon the pendulum, caught himself wondering at the slowness of its movements.

About ten minutes past nine, Goquet, the smiling clerk, made his appearance, and was greeted with a gruff "Well! so you have come at last," that left him in no doubt as to the state of his master's humor.

Yet Goquet had come much earlier than usual, for his movements also had been quickened by curiosity.

He tried to make some excuse, but M. Segmuller cut it short, with such a curt response, that he felt no desire to continue the conversation. "Ah!" he thought, "it is very evident that the wind is blowing from a bad corner this morning."

And so, bowing before the storm, he philosophically put on his black silk sleeves, went to his little table, and pretended to be absorbed in the task of cutting his pens and preparing his paper.

But although he dared not show it he was very much vexed. For the evening before, while conversing with his wife, he had gained some new ideas in regard to the

mysterious prisoner; and he was eager to impart them to the judge.

But no favorable opportunity presented itself. M. Segmuller, who was usually calmness personified, and dignity *par excellence*, was transformed. He paced restlessly to and fro, he sat down, he sprang up, he gesticulated wildly, and seemed unable to be quiet for a moment.

"The prosecution is evidently making no headway," thought the clerk. "May's prospects are encouraging."

At that moment this idea delighted him; he sided with the prisoner, his rancor was so intense.

From half past nine to ten o'clock M. Segmuller rang for his messenger at least five times, and each time he asked him the same questions.

"Are you sure that Monsieur Lecoq has not been here this morning? Inquire! If he has not been here he must certainly have sent someone, or he must have written me."

Each time the astonished door-keeper replied:

"No one has been here, and there is no letter."

The judge became more and more angry and impatient.

"It is inconceivable!" he murmured. "Here I am upon coals of fire, and that man dares to keep me waiting. Where can he be?"

At last he ordered a messenger to go and see if he could not find Lecoq somewhere in the neighborhood; perhaps in some restaurant or coffee-house; told him to go and find him and bring him there quickly; very quickly.

When the man had gone, M. Segmuller seemed to recover his composure, in a slight degree, at least.

"We must not lose valuable time," he said to his clerk. "I was to examine the Widow Chupin's son. I had better do so immediately. Go and tell them to bring him to me. Lecoq left the order at the prison."

In less than a quarter of an hour Polyte entered the room.

From head to foot, from his glazed cap to his gaudy-colored carpet slippers, he was indeed the man of the portrait upon which poor Toinon, the virtuous, had lavished such loving glances.

But the picture was flattered. The photographer could not fix the expression of low cunning that was imprinted upon the face of the original, nor the impudence that breathed in his smile, nor the mingled cowardice and ferocity of his eyes, which always evaded you. Nor could the picture portray the unwholesome, livid pallor of his skin, the restless opening and shutting of the eyelids, and the thin lips tightly drawn over the short, sharp teeth.

It would be difficult for him to astonish those who saw him by any act of violence.

For to see him, was to judge and to estimate his worth.

When he had answered the preliminary questions, told the judge that he was thirty years of age, and that he had been born in Paris, he assumed a pretentious attitude and waited.

But before proceeding to the real matter in hand, M. Segmuller wished to relieve the complacent scoundrel of some of his assurance.

He reminded Polyte, in very forcible terms, that the judgment to be rendered in the affair in which he was implicated would depend very much upon his behavior and his responses during the present examination.

Polyte listened with a nonchalant and even ironical air.

In fact, he cared only the merest trifle for the threat. He had made previous inquiries and had ascertained that it would be impossible to condemn him to more than six months' imprisonment for the offence for which he had been arrested; and what did a month more or less matter to him?

The judge, who read this feeling in Polyte's eyes, cut his discourse short.

"Justice now demands some information from you concerning the *habitués* of your mother's establishment."

"There are a great many of them, M'sieur," responded Polyte, in a coarse, harsh voice.

"Do you know one among them by the name of Gustave?"

"No, M'sieur."

To insist would probably awaken suspicion in Polyte's mind, if he was really speaking the truth; so M. Segmuller continued:

"You must, however, remember Lacheneur?"

"Lacheneur? It is the first time I have ever heard that name."

"Take care. The police have means of finding out a great many things."

The scapegrace did not flinch.

"I am telling the truth, M'sieur," he insisted. "What interest could I possibly have in deceiving you?"

The door opened suddenly, and Toinon, his wife, entered with her child in her arms.

On seeing her husband, the poor woman uttered a cry of joy, and sprang toward him. But Polyte, step-

ping back, bestowed upon her a terrible glance that rooted her to the spot.

"It must be my enemy who pretends that I know anyone named Lacheneur! I would like to kill the person who uttered such a falsehood. Yes; kill the person—and I will never forgive it."

CHAPTER XXVII

Having received orders to go in search of Lecoq and to bring him back, if he succeeded in finding him, M. Segmuller's messenger had started on his errand.

The commission was not at all disagreeable to him; it afforded him an excuse for quitting his post, and also a very pleasant little stroll through the neighborhood.

He went to the prefecture first, by the longest way, however; but on arriving there, he could find no one who had seen the young detective.

He then strolled leisurely through the restaurants and through the drinking saloons in the vicinity of the Palais de Justice, and living through its patronage.

Being a conscientious commissioner, he entered each of these establishments, and having recognized several acquaintances, he felt compelled to proffer and to accept certain courtesies at the rate of fifty centimes per glass. But no Lecoq.

He was returning in haste, a trifle uneasy on account of the length of his absence, when a carriage stopped before the gateway of the palace.

He looked up, and—oh, happiness! from this carriage he saw Lecoq descend, followed by Father Absinthe and the Widow Chupin's daughter-in-law.

His serenity of mind was instantly restored; and it

was in a very important tone that he delivered the order for Lecoq to follow him without losing a minute.

"Monsieur has asked for you a number of times," said he. "He has been extremely impatient, and he is in very bad humor; and you may expect to have your head snapped off in the most expeditious manner."

Lecoq smiled as he ascended the staircase. Was he not bringing with him the most potent of justifications! He was thinking of the agreeable surprise he had in store for the judge, and he seemed to see the sudden brightening of that functionary's gloomy face.

And yet the message delivered by the door-keeper, and his urgent appeal that Lecoq should not loiter by the way, was fated to produce the most unfortunate results.

Expected, as he supposed, and urged not to delay, Lecoq saw nothing wrong in opening the door of M. Segmuller's office without knocking, and he obeyed the fatal impulse that impelled him to enter in advance of the poor woman whose testimony might be so decisive.

Stupefaction seized him and held him motionless when he saw that the judge was not alone, and when he recognized, in this witness, whom M. Segmuller was examining, the original of the portrait, Polyte Chupin.

Instantly he comprehended his mistake, and its consequences. He did his best to prevent any communication, any interchange of thought between the husband and wife.

He sprang toward Toinon, and, catching her rudely by the arm, he ordered her to leave the room on the instant.

"You cannot remain here," he cried; "come, go!"

But the poor creature was entirely overcome, and

trembled like a leaf. She could see and hear nothing except her husband. To behold again this man whom she adored, what happiness! But why did he recoil from her? Why did he cast such withering glances upon her?

She tried to speak, to explain; but while she stood there frightened and bewildered, Polyte's harsh condemnation pierced her brain like a rifle-ball.

Seeing this, Lecoq seized her about the waist, and, lifting her as he would a feather, he carried her out into the corridor.

The whole scene had not lasted more than a moment, and M. Segmuller was still engaged in framing the order, when he found that the door was already closed, and that he was again alone with Polyte.

"Ah, ha!" thought Goquet, in a flutter of delight; "here is something new."

But as these little diversions never made him forget his duties as a clerk, he leaned toward the judge to ask:

"Must I take down the last words that were uttered by the witness?"

"Certainly," responded M. Segmuller, "and word for word, if you please."

He paused; the door opened again, to admit the door-keeper, who timidly, and with a rather guilty air, brought in a note, and again withdrew.

This note, scribbled in pencil by Lecoq upon a leaf torn from his memorandum-book, told the judge the name of the woman who had just entered his room, and told briefly, but clearly, the information that had just been obtained.

"That boy thinks of everything!" murmured M. Segmuller.

The meaning of the scene that had taken place before his eyes a moment previous was now evident.

He understood the whole.

He regretted most bitterly this unfortunate meeting. But whom ought he to blame for it? Himself—himself alone; his impatience, his lack of caution, which, as soon as his messenger had departed, had induced him to summon Polyte Chupin.

While he could not doubt the enormous influence of this trifling circumstance, he would not allow himself to be alarmed by it, and continued his task of endeavoring to elicit some information from the sorry specimen before him.

"Let us go on," he said to Polyte.

The scapegrace gave a careless sign of assent. Since his wife had been taken from the room he had not moved, and was apparently sublimely indifferent to all that was passing around him.

"Was that your wife who came in just now?" demanded M. Segmuller.

"Yes."

"She wished to embrace you, and you repulsed her."

"I did not repulse her, M'sieur."

"You kept her at a distance; if you had any affection, you would at least have given a look to your child, which she held out to you. Why was it?"

"It was not a time for sentiment."

"You are not telling the truth. You simply desired to attract her attention while you dictated her deposition."

"I—I dictate her deposition! I do not understand you, M'sieur."

"Were it not for this supposition, the words you uttered would be unintelligible."

"What words?"

The judge turned to his clerk:

"Goquet," said he, "read the last remark you took down, to the witness."

The clerk, in a monotonous voice, read:

"I would like to kill the person who dared to say that I knew Lacheneur."

"*Eh bien!*" insisted M. Segmuller; "what do you mean by that?"

"It is very easy to understand, M'sieur."

M. Segmuller rose.

"Enough of this prevaricating! You certainly ordered your wife to keep silence; that fact is evident. Why should you have done this? and what can she tell us? Do you suppose that the police are ignorant of your relations with Lacheneur—of your conversation with him when he, in a carriage, and in an unfrequented spot, awaited your coming—of the hopes of fortune which you based upon him? Be guided by me; decide to confess all, while there is yet time; do not pursue a course which may lead you into serious danger. One can be an accomplice in more ways than one."

It is certain that Polyte's impudence and indifference had received a very severe shock. He seemed confounded, and hung his head, muttering some unintelligible response.

Still, he preserved an obstinate silence; and the judge, who had just employed his strongest argument, and in vain, gave up in despair. He rang the bell, and ordered the guard to conduct the witness back to prison, and to take every precaution to prevent him from seeing his wife again.

When Polyte had departed, Lecoq reappeared. He was in despair.

"To think," he repeated again and again, "that I did not draw from this woman all that she knew, when it could have been done so easily. But I thought that you would be waiting for me, Monsieur, so I made haste to bring her here. I thought I was acting for the best——"

"Never mind, the misfortune can be repaired."

"No, Monsieur, no; we shall learn nothing more from this poor woman. It is impossible to extort a single word from her since she has seen her husband. She loves him, with a blind and foolish adoration; and he has an all-powerful influence over her. He has ordered her to be silent, and she will be silent 'even unto death.'"

The young man's fears were well grounded. M. Segmuller saw this only too well, the instant Toinon, the virtuous, again set foot in his office.

The poor creature seemed nearly heartbroken. It was evident that she would have given her life to retract the words which had escaped her in her attic. Polyte's look had made her turn cold with horror, and had aroused the most sinister apprehensions in her mind. Not understanding his connection with the affair, she asked herself if her testimony would not be a death-warrant for him.

So she refused to make any response other than "no" or "I do not know" to questions; and all that she had previously said she retracted. She swore that she was mistaken, that she had been misunderstood, that her words had been misrepresented. She declared upon the most sacred oaths, that she had never before heard the name of Lacheneur.

At last, when they pressed their questions too closely,

she burst into wild, despairing sobs, pressing her weeping child convulsively to her breast.

What could one do against this foolish obstinacy, which was as unreasoning and blind as that of a brute? M. Segmuller hesitated. Finally, after a moment's reflection:

"You may retire, my good woman," he said, kindly; "but remember that your strange silence injures your husband more than anything you could say."

She left the room—or rather, she rushed wildly away—and the judge and the detective exchanged glances of dismay and consternation.

"I said so before," thought Goquet; "the prisoner understands what he is about. I would be willing to bet a hundred to one on the prisoner."

CHAPTER XXVIII

In a single word Delamorte Felines has defined prosecution. A "struggle," he terms it; and it is, in reality, a terrible struggle between justice, seeking after the truth, and crime, endeavoring to conceal it.

The judge of instruction, as he is called in France, is invested with discretionary powers, and is responsible only to the law and to his own conscience.

No one can hamper him, no one can give him orders. Administration, police, armed force, are all at his disposal. At a word from him twenty agents, or a hundred, if need be, search Paris, ransack France, or explore Europe.

If he suppose that any person can throw light upon an obscure point, he orders that man to appear in his office; and he must come, if he live a hundred leagues away. Such is the position.

Isolated behind the bars, and probably in the solitary cell, the man accused of a crime is, as it were, cut off from the number of the living. No news from without reaches him in the cell, where he lives beneath the eye of his keeper. Of what is said, of what is passing outside these walls, he knows nothing. What witnesses have been examined, and what they have said, he knows not; and, in his doubt and uncertainty, he again and again asks himself to what extent he has been compromised, what proofs have been collected against him, and what grave charges are ready to crush him.

Such is the position of the prisoner. And yet, in spite of the fact that the two adversaries are so unequally armed, the man in the solitary cell not unfrequently conquers.

If he is sure that he has left behind him no proofs of his crime, if he has no antecedents to rise up against him, he can, impregnable in a defence of absolute denial, brave all the attacks of justice.

Such was, at this moment, the situation of May, the mysterious murderer.

M. Segmuller and Lecoq, with mingled sorrow and anger, were forced to admit this.

They had hoped that Polyte Chupin or his wife would give them the solution of this vexed problem—this hope had been disappointed.

And the identity of the prisoner remained as problematical as ever.

"And yet," exclaimed the judge vehemently, "and yet these people know something about this matter, and if they would——"

"They will not."

"Why, what motive influences them? This is what is necessary to discover. Who will tell us by what

dazzling promises the silence of a scoundrel like this Polyte Chupin has been purchased? Upon what recompense does he count, since he is willing to brave real danger by this silence?"

Lecoq did not reply, but his knit brows showed that his thoughts were busy.

"There is one question which puzzles me more than anything else; and if it could be answered we should have made a long step in advance," he finally remarked.

"What is it?"

"You ask, Monsieur, what reward has been promised to Chupin. I ask who it is that has promised him this reward."

"Who has promised it? Evidently the accomplice who has beaten us on every point."

At this homage to the skill and audacity of his opponent, the young detective clinched his hands, and vowed vengeance against the man who had made him a prisoner, only an hour before.

"Certainly," he replied. "I recognize his hand in this. And now, what artifice has he used? We understand the method by which he succeeded in gaining an interview with the Widow Chupin. But how has he succeeded in reaching Polyte, who is a prisoner, and closely guarded?"

He did not utter his whole thought, but M. Segmuller understood him, and seemed intensely surprised, and even a trifle indignant, at the young man's suspicions.

"What can you mean?" said he. "You cannot suppose that one of the employees has been corrupted?"

Lecoq shook his head with a rather equivocal air.

"I mean nothing," he replied; "I suspect no one. I am merely in pursuit of information. Has Chupin been warned—yes or no?"

" Yes, of course."

" The fact is admitted then. So I presume we must explain it by supposing either that there are informers in the prison, or that Chupin has been allowed to see some visitor."

M. Segmuller was evidently disturbed. He seemed to be hesitating between two opinions; then, suddenly making up his mind, he rose, took his hat, and said:

" I wish to have this matter cleared up. Come, Monsieur Lecoq."

In two minutes (thanks to the dark and narrow passage that connects the depot with the Palais de Justice) they entered the jail.

Rations had just been served to the prisoners, and the head keeper, who had been engaged in superintending the distribution, was now promenading in the court-yard with Gevrol.

As soon as he saw the judge, he approached him with great deference of manner.

" Undoubtedly, sir, you have come about the prisoner, May?"

" Yes."

Since it was a question of a prisoner, Gevrol thought he might approach without impropriety.

" I was just now talking to Inspector Gevrol about the prisoner," pursued the keeper, " and I was telling him that I had good reason to be satisfied with this man's conduct. It not only has been quite unnecessary to place him in the strait-jacket, but his mood seems to have changed entirely. He has a good appetite; he is as gay as a lark, and laughs and jests with his keeper."

The judge and Lecoq exchanged troubled glances.

This gayety might be assumed for the purpose of carrying out his *rôle* as a jester and buffoon; but might

it not have come from a certainty of defeating his opponents? or, who knows? perhaps, from some favorable news received from without.

This last supposition offered itself so persistently to M. Segmuller's mind that he trembled.

"Are you sure," he inquired, "that no communication from outside can reach the inmates of the solitary cells?"

The worthy keeper seemed to be deeply wounded by the implied doubt. His subordinates suspected—perhaps the keeper himself! He could not help lifting his hands to heaven in mute protest against such injustice.

"Am I sure?" he exclaimed. "Then you have never visited the solitary cells—or the secret cells, as we call them. You have no idea, then, of the precautions that surround them, the triple bolts, the grating that shuts out the sunlight, to say nothing of the guard who walks beneath the windows night and day. Not even a bird could reach the prisoners in those cells."

Such a description could not fail to reassure the most sceptical.

"Now that I am easy on that score," said the judge, "I would like some information regarding another prisoner—a certain Chupin."

"Ah! I know—a vile scoundrel!"

"He is, indeed. I would like to know if he received any visitor yesterday?"

"It will be necessary for me to inquire of the clerk before I can answer with certainty. Wait a moment; here is a man who, perhaps, can inform us. He is on guard at the entrance. Here, Ferrau, this way!" he called.

The man hastened to obey the summons.

"Do you know whether the prisoner named Chupin was in the reception-room yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, he was; I conducted him there myself."

"And who was his visitor?" inquired Lecoq, eagerly; "a large man, was it not, very red in the face——"

"Excuse me, Monsieur; the visitor was a lady; his aunt, he told me."

An exclamation of surprise escaped the lips of the judge and of the detective, and together they demanded:

"What was she like?"

"Small," replied the man, "with very fair complexion and light hair; she seemed to be a very respectable woman."

"It must have been one of the fugitives who escaped from Widow Chupin's hovel," exclaimed Lecoq.

Gevrol laughed loudly.

"Still that Russian princess," said he.

But the judge did not appear to enjoy the pleasantry.

"You forget yourself, Monsieur," he said, severely. "You forget that the sneers you address to your comrade also touch me!"

The general saw that he had gone too far; and while he bestowed one of his most venomous glances upon Lecoq, he mumbled his excuses to the judge.

M. Segmuller did not hear them apparently. He bowed to the keeper, and motioned Lecoq to follow him.

"Run to the prefecture," he said, as soon as they were out of hearing, "and ascertain how and under what pretext this woman obtained permission to visit Polyte Chupin."

CHAPTER XXIX

Left alone, M. Segmuller returned mechanically to his office, guided by force of habit rather than by any volition of his own.

All his faculties were hard at work; and so great was his preoccupation that he, who was ordinarily the quintessence of politeness, entirely forgot to return the salutations which he received on his way.

How had this case, until now, been conducted? By hazard, according to the caprice of events. Like a man lost in the darkness, he had left his course to chance, walking toward anything which, in the distance, seemed to him like a light.

To travel in this way is a useless expenditure of time and strength. He admitted this in recognizing the urgent and pressing necessity of some definite plan of action.

Since he had not succeeded in capturing the city by a sudden attack, he was compelled to resign himself to the methodical delays of a regular and protracted siege.

And he decided to do this at once, for he felt that the hours were fleeting all too fast. He knew that delay only increased the uncertainty of success, and that the investigation of a crime becomes more and more difficult, in proportion as one is removed from the time when said crime was committed.

There were some things that might still be done.

Ought he not to confront the murderer, the Widow Chupin, and Polyte with the bodies of their victims?

Such horrible encounters are sometimes productive of unhoped-for results.

More than one murderer, when unsuspectedly brought into the presence of his victim, had changed color and lost his assurance.

There were other witnesses whom he could examine. Papillon, the coachman; the *concièrge* of the mansion on the Rue de Bourgogne, where the two women had taken refuge for a moment, a Mme. Milner, the mistress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg.

Would it not also be advisable to summon, with the least possible delay, some of the residents in the vicinity of the Poivrière, and some comrades of Polyte, as well as the proprietor of the Rainbow, where the victims and the murderer had passed a portion of the evening?

Certainly, one had no reason to hope for any great enlightenment from any particular one of these witnesses, but each one might add his conjectures, express an opinion, or be able to throw some light on the subject.

Goquet, the smiling clerk, acting in compliance with the orders of the judge, had just finished drawing up at least a dozen citations, when Lecoq reappeared.

"Well?" exclaimed the judge, eagerly.

Really, the question was superfluous. The result of his expedition was plainly written upon the face of the detective.

"Nothing—always nothing."

"But how can that be? Do they not know to whom the permission to visit Polyte Chupin was given?"

"Pardon, Monsieur, they know but too well. We find only a fresh proof of the infernal skill with which the accomplice profits by every circumstance. The permit that was used yesterday was in the name of a sister of the Widow Chupin, Rose Adelaide Pitard. The card of admission was given her more than a week ago,

in compliance with a request which was indorsed by the commissioner of police."

The surprise of the judge was so intense that it gave to his face an almost ludicrous expression.

"Is this aunt also in the plot?" he murmured.

The detective shook his head.

"I think not," he answered. "It was not she, at all events, who was in the prison parlor yesterday. The clerks at the prefecture remember the widow's sister very well, and gave me a full description of her. She is a woman over five feet in height, very dark complexioned, very wrinkled and weather-beaten in appearance, and about sixty years of age. The visitor yesterday was small, blond, and apparently not more than forty-five."

"If that is the case," interrupted M. Segmuller, "this visitor must be one of our fugitives."

"I do not think so."

"Who do you suppose she was, then?"

"The mistress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg—that clever woman who succeeded so well in deceiving me. But she had better take care! There are means of verifying my suspicions."

The judge scarcely heard Lecoq's words, so enraged was he at the inconceivable audacity and marvellous devotion of these people who risked everything to preserve the incognito of the murderer.

"But how could the accomplice have known of the existence of this permit?"

"Oh, nothing could be easier, Monsieur. When the Widow Chupin and the accomplice held their interview at the station-house of the Barrière d'Italie, they both realized the necessity of warning Polyte. They tried to devise some way of seeing him; the old woman re-

membered her sister's card of admission, and the man made some excuse to borrow it."

"Such is undoubtedly the case," said M. Segmuller, approvingly. "It will be necessary to ascertain, however——"

Lecoq's bearing was that of a resolute man, whose eager zeal has no need of a stimulant.

"And I *will* ascertain," said he, "if you, Monsieur, will intrust the matter to me. No aid to success shall be neglected. Before evening I would have two spies on the watch—one at the Rue de la Butte-aux-Cailles, the other at the door of the Hôtel de Mariembourg. If the accomplice attempted to visit Toinon, or Madame Milner, he should be arrested. It would be our turn then!"

But there was no time to waste in words and in idle boastings. He checked himself, and took his hat preparatory to departure.

"Now," said he, "I must ask Monsieur le Juge for my liberty; if he has any orders to give me, he will find a trusty messenger in the corridor, Father Absinthe, one of my colleagues. I wish to discover some fact in regard to two of our most important articles of conviction, Lacheneur's letter and the ear-ring."

"Go, then," responded M. Segmuller, "and good luck to you!"

Good luck! The detective, indeed, looked for it. If, up to the present moment, he had taken his successive defeats good-humoredly, it was because he believed that he had a talisman in his pocket which would insure him victory at last.

"I shall be very stupid if I am not capable of discovering the owner of an article of such great value!" he said, referring to the diamond. "And when we

find the owner, we discover, at the same time, the identity of our mysterious prisoner!"

The first step to be taken was to ascertain in what shop this ornament had been purchased. To go from jeweller to jeweller, asking: "Is this your work?" would be a tedious process.

Fortunately, Lecoq knew a man who would be willing to give him all the information in his power.

This man was an old Hollander, named Van Numen, who, where jewelry or precious stones were concerned, was without a rival in Paris.

He was employed in the prefecture in the capacity of an expert in such matters. He was considered rich; but he was far more wealthy than people supposed. Shabby as he always was in appearance, he had a passion for diamonds. He always had some of them about his person, in a little box, which he drew out of his pocket a dozen times an hour, as a snuff-taker brings out his snuff-box.

This worthy man greeted Lecoq very affably. He put on his glasses, examined the jewel with a grimace of satisfaction, and, in the tone of an oracle, said:

"That stone is worth eight thousand francs, and it was set by Doisty, on the Rue de la Paix."

Twenty minutes later Lecoq entered the establishment of this celebrated jeweller.

Van Numen was not mistaken. Doisty immediately recognized the ornament, which had, indeed, come from his store. But to whom had he sold it? He could not recollect, for it had passed out of his hands three or four years before.

"But wait a moment," he added; "I will ask my wife, who has an incomparable memory."

Mme. Doisty deserved this eulogium. A single

glance at the jewel enabled her to say that she had seen this ear-ring before, and that the pair had been purchased from them by the Marquise d'Arlange.

"You must recollect," she added, turning to her husband, "that the marquise paid us only nine thousand francs on account, and that we had all the trouble in the world in collecting the remainder."

Her husband did remember this circumstance.

"Now," said the detective, "I would like the address of this marquise."

"She lives in the Faubourg St. Germain," responded Mme. Doisty, "near the Esplanade des Invalides."

CHAPTER XXX

While in the presence of the jeweller, Lecoq had refrained from any demonstration of satisfaction.

But when he had left the store, he evinced such delirious joy that the amazed passers-by wondered if the man were not mad. He did not walk, he fairly danced over the stones, gesticulating all the while in the most ridiculous fashion, as he addressed this triumphant monologue to the empty air:

"At last," said he, "this affair emerges from the mystery that has enshrouded it. At last I reach the veritable actors in the drama, these exalted personages whom I had suspected. Ah! Gevrol, illustrious general! you wished a Russian princess, but you will be obliged to content yourself with a simple marquise."

But this species of vertigo gradually disappeared. His good sense reasserted itself, and the young man felt that he would have need of all his coolness, all his penetration, and all his sagacity to bring this expedition to a successful termination.

What course should he pursue, on entering the presence of the marquise, in order to draw a full confession from her, and to obtain all the details of the murder, as well as the murderer's name?

"It will be best to threaten her, to frighten her into confession, that will be the best way. If I give her time for reflection, I shall learn nothing."

He paused in his cogitations, for he had reached the abode of the Marquise d'Arlange—a charming house, surrounded by a garden; and before entering the mansion, he deemed it advisable to learn something of its interior and of its inmates.

"It is here, then," he murmured, "that I shall find the solution of the enigma! Here behind those rich curtains crouches the frightened fugitive of the other night. For what an agony of fear must torture her since she has discovered the loss of the jewel!"

For more than an hour sheltered beneath a neighboring *porte-cochère*, Lecoq stood watching the house. He wished to see the face of some inmate of the mansion. But his time was lost. Not a face showed itself at the windows, not a valet traversed the court.

At last, losing patience, he determined to make some inquiries in the neighborhood.

He could not take a decisive step without having some knowledge of the people he was to encounter. He was wondering where he could obtain the desired information, when he perceived, on the opposite side of the street, a wine-merchant smoking on the pavement in front of his shop.

He approached him, and, pretending that he had forgotten an address, politely inquired which house was the abode of the Marquise d'Arlange.

Without a word, without even condescending to re-

move his pipe from his mouth, the man pointed to the house.

But there was a way of rendering him communicative, and that was to enter his establishment, call for something to drink, and invite the proprietor to drink with him.

This the young man did, and the sight of two well-filled glasses unbound, as by a miracle, the tongue of the worthy shop-keeper.

One could not have found a better man to interrogate, as he had been established in that quarter for ten years, and was honored by the patronage of most of the residents.

"I pity you if you are going to the house of the marquise to collect a bill," he remarked to Lecoq. "You will have plenty of time to learn the way to the house before you see the color of your money. You will only be another of the many creditors who never let that bell rest."

"The devil! Is she so poor as all that?"

"Poor! Everyone knows that she has an income of twenty thousand livres, without counting this house. But when one spends double one's income every year, you know——"

He stopped short, to call Lecoq's attention to two ladies who were passing—one, rather more than forty years of age, dressed in black; the other, very young, and still clothed in the garb of a school-girl.

"And that," he added, "is the marquise's granddaughter, Mademoiselle Claire, attended by her governess, Mademoiselle Smith."

Lecoq's head whirled.

"Her granddaughter?" he stammered.

"Yes; the daughter of her deceased son, if you like that any better."

"How old is the marquise, then?"

"At least sixty; but one would never suspect it. She is one of those persons who will live a hundred years, like trees. And what an old wretch she is! She would think no more of knocking me over the head than I would of emptying this glass of wine——"

"Pardon," interrupted Lecoq, "but does she live alone in that great house?"

"Yes; that is, with only her granddaughter, the governess, and two servants. But what is the matter with you?"

It was not strange that he asked this question, for Lecoq had turned as white as his shirt. The magic edifice of his hopes had crumbled beneath the weight of this man's words as completely as if it were a frail card-house constructed by some child.

"Nothing—nothing at all," he responded, in an uncertain voice.

But he could not endure this torture of uncertainty any longer. He went to the house and rang the bell.

The servant who came to open the door examined him attentively, then replied, that madame la marquise was in the country.

Evidently he did him the honor of taking him for some creditor.

But he insisted so adroitly, he gave him to understand so explicitly that he did not come to collect money, he spoke so earnestly of urgent business, that the man finally admitted him to the vestibule, telling him that he would go and ascertain if madame had really gone out.

She was at home. An instant after the valet re-

turned to tell Lecoq to follow him; and after passing a large and magnificently furnished drawing-room, he conducted him into a charming boudoir, hung with rose-color.

There, in a large reclining chair by the fireplace, sat an old woman, large, bony, and terrible of aspect, loaded with ornaments and with paint. She was engaged in knitting a stripe of green wool.

She turned toward the visitor just enough to show him the *rouge* on one cheek; then, as he seemed rather frightened—a fact flattering to her vanity—she spoke to him quite affably.

"Ah, well! young man; what brings you here?"

Lecoq was not frightened, but he was intensely disappointed to see that Mme. d'Arlange could not be one of the women who had visited the Widow Chupin's saloon on that memorable night.

There was nothing about her appearance that corresponded in the least with the description given by Papillon.

Then the young man remembered the small footprints left in the snow by the two fugitives. The foot of this marquise, which showed itself below the bottom of her dress, was truly colossal in size.

"Well! are you dumb?" inquired the old lady, raising her voice.

Without making a direct response, Lecoq drew from his pocket the precious ear-ring, and, placing it upon the table beside her, he said:

"I bring you this article which I have found, and which, I am told, belongs to you."

Madame d'Arlange laid down her knitting to examine the jewel.

"It is true," she said, after a moment, "that this or-

nament formerly belonged to me. It was a fancy that I had, about four years ago, and it cost me dear—at least twenty thousand francs. Ah! Doisty, the man who sold me these diamonds must make a handsome living. But I had a granddaughter to educate! Pressing need of money compelled me to sell them."

"To whom?" inquired Lecoq, eagerly.

"Eh!" exclaimed the lady, evidently shocked at his audacity, "you are very curious, upon my word!"

"Excuse me, Madame, but I am so anxious to find the owner of this valuable ornament."

Madame d'Arlange regarded her visitor with an air of mingled curiosity and surprise.

"Such honesty!" said she. "Oh, oh! And, of course, you do not hope for a sou by way of reward——"

"Madame!"

"Good, good! There is not the least need for you to turn as red as a poppy, young man. I sold these diamonds to a great German lady—for the nobility in Austria have some money left—to the Baroness de Watchau."

"And where does this lady live?"

"At the Père la Chaise, probably, since she died about a year ago. These women of the present day—a turn in the waltz, and a current of air, and it is all over with them! In my day, after each galop, young girls swallowed a great glass of sweetened wine, and sat down between two doors. And we did very well, as you see."

"But, Madame," insisted Lecoq, "the Baron de Watchau must have left heirs—a husband, children——"

"No one but a brother, who holds a court position

at Vienna; and who could not leave even to attend the funeral. He sent orders that all his sister's personal property should be sold—not even excepting her wardrobe—and the money sent to him."

Lecoq could not repress an exclamation of disappointment.

"How unfortunate!" he murmured.

"Why?" asked the old lady. "Under these circumstances, the diamonds will probably remain in your hands, and I am rejoiced at it; it will be a just recompense for your honesty."

If fate, to all Lecoq's other afflictions, had determined to add that of irony, his cup of sorrow would, indeed, be full. The Marquise d'Arlange inflicted upon him the most exquisite torture when with every appearance of sincerity, she expressed a wish that he might never find the lady who had lost this costly jewel.

To cry out, to give vent to his anger, to reproach this old woman for her stupidity would have afforded him ineffable consolation. But in that case, what would become of his *rôle* of honest young man?

He forced his lips to display a smile; he even stammered an acknowledgment of her goodness. Then, as if he had no more to expect, he bowed low, and withdrew, overwhelmed by this new misfortune.

Owing to some strange fatality, or to the marvellous skill of his adversaries, he had seen all the threads upon which he had relied to guide him out of this labyrinth, break in his hands.

Was he the dupe of some new comedy? This was not probable.

If the murderer's accomplice had taken the jeweller, Doisty, into his confidence, he would have told him to reply to any inquiries by saying that he did not know

to whom the diamonds had been sold, or that it had not come from his establishment.

But this complication of circumstances proved Doisty's sincerity at least.

Then the young man had other reasons for not doubting the truth of the assertions made by the marquise. A peculiar look, which he had detected between the jeweller and his wife was a sufficient authentication.

This glance said very plainly that, in their opinion, the marquise, in purchasing the diamonds, had engaged in a little speculation, more common than people suppose among women of the world. She had bought on credit, to sell at a loss, profiting momentarily by the difference between the sum she had paid on account and the price she received for the jewels.

Lecoq was resolved to fathom the mystery that surrounded the ornament; and with this object in view, he returned to Doisty's establishment, and, by means of a plausible pretext, succeeded in gaining a sight of the books in which the proprietor recorded his sales.

On the year and the month that Mme. Doisty had mentioned, the sale of these ear-rings had been recorded, not only upon the day-book, but upon the ledger. The nine thousand francs paid by Mme. d'Arlange at long intervals were also duly recorded.

How Mme. Milner might inscribe a false entry upon her register, one could easily understand. But it was absurd to suppose that the jeweller had falsified all his accounts for four years.

The facts, therefore, were indisputable; still the young detective was not satisfied.

He hurried to the Faubourg-Saint-Honore, to the house which the Baroness de Watchau had occupied,

and there he found a good-natured *concièrge*, who informed him that after the decease of that poor lady, her furniture and her personal property had been taken to an establishment on the Rue Drouot. "And the sale was under the charge of Monsieur Petit," added the obliging *concièrge*.

Without losing a minute, Lecoq ran to the establishment of this auctioneer, who made a specialty of rare collections of bric-à-brac.

M. Petit remembered the "Watchau sale" very well; it had made quite a sensation at the time, and he soon found a long catalogue of the articles sold among his papers.

Many jewels were mentioned, with the sum paid, and the names of the parties purchasing; but there was not the slightest allusion to the accursed ear-rings.

Lecoq drew out the diamond which he had in his pocket. The auctioneer could not remember that he had ever seen it; but this was no evidence to the contrary—so many articles passed through his hands!

But this much he could declare upon oath; that the brother of the baroness, her heir, had received nothing—not so much as a pin's worth of his sister's effects; and that he had been in a great hurry to receive the proceeds, which amounted to the very pleasant sum of one hundred and sixty-seven thousand five hundred and thirty francs, after all expenses had been deducted.

"So everything that this lady possessed was sold?" inquired Lecoq.

"Everything."

"And what is the name of this brother?"

"Watchau, also. The Baroness had probably married one of her relatives. This brother, until last year,

occupied a very prominent diplomatic position. He resides at Berlin now, I think."

Certainly this information would not seem to indicate that these witnesses had been tampered with; and yet Lecoq was not satisfied.

"It is very strange," he thought, on regaining his lodgings, "that to whichever side I turn in this affair, I find Germany. The murderer comes from Leipsic, Madame Milner must be a Bavarian, and now here is an Austrian baroness."

It was too late to make any further inquiries that evening, and Lecoq went to bed; but the next morning, at an early hour, he resumed his investigations with fresh ardor.

Now, there seemed to be only one chance of success left: the letter signed by Lacheneur, which had been found in the pocket of the murdered soldier.

This letter, judging from the half-effaced heading, must have been written in a *café* on the Boulevard Beaumarchais.

To discover in which *café* would be only child's play.

The fourth restaurant-keeper to whom Lecoq exhibited this letter recognized the paper as his.

But neither he, nor his wife, nor the young lady at the desk, nor the waiters, nor any of the guests present at the time, had ever in their lives heard the three syllables of this name, Lacheneur.

What was he to do now? Was the case entirely hopeless? Not yet.

Had not the dying soldier declared that this Lacheneur was an old comedian?

Seizing upon this frail clew, as a drowning man clutches at the merest fragment of the floating wreck, Lecoq turned his steps in another direction, and hur-

ried from theatre to theatre, asking everyone, from the porters to the managers:

"Do you not know an actor named Lacheneur?"

Everywhere he met with the same response, not unfrequently enlivened by rough jokes. And very often those whom he interrogated inquired:

"What sort of a looking man is your artist?"

What could he reply? All his responses were necessarily limited to that phrase uttered by Toinon: "I thought him a very respectable-looking man." This was not a very graphic description, however. Besides, it was rather doubtful what a woman like the wife of Polyte Chupin meant by the word "respectable." Did she apply it to the man's age, to his personal appearance, or to his apparent fortune?

Sometimes they inquired:

"What *rôles* does your comedian play?"

And the young man, in his ignorance, could make no reply; but this much he could have said with truth, that this Lacheneur was playing a *rôle* now that made him, Lecoq, wild with despair.

He next had recourse to a mode of investigation which is generally the last resort of the police, but which is generally successful, because it is so sensible and simple.

He determined to examine all the books in which the law compels the proprietors of hotels and lodging-houses to keep a record of their guests.

Rising long before daybreak, and going to bed late at night, he spent all his time in visiting the hotels, furnished houses, and lodgings in Paris.

Vain search! Not once did he find the name of Lacheneur that haunted his brain. Was there really such a name? Was it not a pseudonym, invented for

convenience? He had not found it even in the *Almanach Botlin*, where one finds all the most singular and absurd names in France—those which are formed of the most fantastic mingling of syllables.

But nothing could daunt him or turn him from the almost impossible task to which he had devoted himself. His obstinacy amounted wellnigh to monomania.

He was no longer subject to occasional outbursts of anger, which were quickly repressed; he lived in a state of constant exasperation, which impaired the clearness of his mind not a little.

No more theories, subtle reasoning, and ingenious deductions. He pursued his search, without method, without order, and much as Father Absinthe might have done when under the influence of alcohol.

Perhaps he had come to rely less upon his own shrewdness than upon chance to drive away the shadows which he divined, which he felt, which he breathed.

CHAPTER XXXI

If one throws a heavy stone into a lake it produces a very considerable commotion, and the whole mass of water is agitated. But the great movement lasts only for a moment; the waves diminish in violence in proportion as the circles enlarge, the surface regains its smoothness, and soon no trace remains of the stone, now buried in the depths below.

So it is with events that occur in our daily life, however momentous they may appear. It seems as if their impression would endure for years—nonsense! Time closes over them more quickly than the water of

the lake; and more rapidly than the stone, they sink into the depths of the past.

At the end of a fortnight, the frightful crime committed in the Widow Chupin's saloon—the triple murder which had made all Paris shudder, with which all the papers had been full, was forgotten as entirely as any commonplace assassination in the reign of Charlemagne.

Only at the Palais de Justice, at the prefecture, and at the prison, was it remembered.

The efforts of M. Segmuller—and Heaven knows that he had spared none—had met with no better success than those of Lecoq.

Close interrogations, skilfully managed examinations, sharp questions, insinuations, menaces, promises, all spent themselves in vain against that invincible force—the strongest man has at his disposal—the force of absolute denial.

One and the same spirit seemed to animate the Widow Chupin, Polyte, Toinon, the virtuous, and Mme. Milner, the mistress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg.

Their depositions proved that they were all in league with the accomplice; and that they all acted in obedience to the same policy. But what did this knowledge avail!

The attitude of these witnesses never varied! It might happen, sometimes, that their looks gave the lie to their denials; but one could read in their eyes their unshaken determination to conceal the truth.

There were moments when the judge, overpowered by a sense of the insufficiency of purely moral weapons, almost regretted the overthrow of the Inquisition.

Yes, in the presence of these allegations, whose im-

pudence almost amounted to insult, he no longer wondered at the barbarities practised by the judges of the Middle Ages—the rack which broke the muscles of its victims, the red-hot pincers, and all those horrible tortures which tore out the truth with the flesh itself.

The manner of the murderer was unaltered, or, if it were, it was only because he played his part with greater perfection each day, like a man who has become accustomed to strange clothing, and who is no longer made uncomfortable by it.

His assurance in the presence of the judge had increased, as if he were more sure of himself, and as if he had in some way learned that the prosecution had made no progress whatever.

During one of his later examinations, he had ventured to say, with something very like irony:

"Why do you keep me so long in the secret cells, Monsieur le Juge? Am I never to be set at liberty, or sent to the court of assizes? Am I to suffer much longer on account of the idea that has taken possession of you (how, I cannot tell), that I am a great personage?"

"I shall keep you until you have confessed," M. Segmuller had responded.

"Confessed what?"

"Oh! you know very well."

This strange man had then shrugged his shoulders, and in that half-despondent, half-mocking tone which was habitual to him, he had responded:

"In that case, there is no hope of my ever leaving this accursed prison!"

It was by reason of this conviction, undoubtedly, that he seemed to be making preparations for an indefinite stay.

He had succeeded in obtaining a portion of the contents of his trunk; and he manifested an almost childish joy in once more entering into possession of his property.

Thanks to the money which had been found upon his person and deposited with the clerk, he was able to procure many little luxuries, which are never denied prisoners who have not yet been tried for whatever may be the charges against them; they have a right to be considered innocent until the jury has decided to the contrary.

To pass away the time, he had asked for a volume of Béranger's poems; and as his request had been granted, he spent most of the day in learning the songs by heart, and in singing them, in a loud voice, and with considerable taste.

He pretended that he was cultivating a talent which would be useful to him when he was again at liberty.

For he had no doubt of his acquittal; at least, so he declared.

He was anxious about the date of his trial, but was not in the least anxious about the result.

He appeared despondent only when he spoke of his profession. He pined for the stage. He almost wept when he thought of his fantastic, many-colored costumes, of his audience, and of his sallies of wit, accompanied by bursts of noisy music.

In his demeanor he had become more frank, more communicative, more submissive; in short, a better fellow.

It was with marked *empressement* that he embraced every opportunity to babble about his past. He liked to recount his adventures during his roving life with M. Simpson, the showman. He had, of course, trav-

elled a great deal; and he remembered all he had seen, and possessed an inexhaustible fund of amusing stories, with which he entertained his keepers.

And every word, and even his slightest action, was characterized by such naturalness, that the employees of the prison no longer doubted the truth of his assertions.

The head keeper was more difficult to convince.

He had declared that this pretended buffoon must be a dangerous criminal who had escaped from the galleys, and who was for this reason determined to conceal his antecedents. Believing this, he had left no means untried to prove it. .

For more than a fortnight May was submitted to the scrutiny of members of the police force and detectives, public and private.

Not one of them recognized him. His photograph had been sent to all the prisons and police head-quarters throughout the empire; but not one of the officials remembered May's features.

Other circumstances occurred, each of which had its influence, and they all spoke in favor of the prisoner.

The second bureau of the prefecture found positive traces of the existence of a foreign artist, named Tringlot, who was probably the man referred to in May's story. This Tringlot had been dead several years.

Moreover, inquiries which had been made in Germany revealed the fact that a certain M. Simpson was very well known in that country, having achieved great renown as a circus manager.

Before so many proofs, the head keeper was forced to yield, and he openly confessed that he had been mistaken.

"The prisoner, May," he wrote to the judge, "is really and truly what he pretends to be. There can be no further doubt on the subject."

This was done at the suggestion of Gevrol.

So M. Segmuller and Lecoq remained alone in their opinion.

It is true that their opinion was worthy, at least, of consideration, since they alone knew all the details of the investigation which had been conducted with strict secrecy.

But that mattered little. To struggle on against all the world is always unpleasant, and not a little dangerous, even if one is a thousand times right.

The "May affair" had become notorious among the members of the police force; and Lecoq was assailed by rough jokes whenever he appeared at the prefecture. Nor did the judge escape entirely.

More than one colleague on meeting him in the corridor, inquired, with a smile, what he had done with his Gaspard Hauser, with his man in the Iron Mask, with his mysterious mountebank.

Both M. Segmuller and Lecoq were afflicted with the angry impatience every man feels when he is absolutely certain that he is right, but has no means of proving it.

They both lost their appetites; they grew thin and haggard.

"*Mon Dieu!*" exclaimed the judge, sometimes, "why did Escorval fall? Had it not been for his accursed mishap, he would have been obliged to endure these perplexities, and I—I should be enjoying myself like other people."

"And I thought myself so shrewd!" murmured the young detective.

But the idea of yielding never once occurred to them Although their temperaments were diametrically opposed to each other, both men had sworn to solve this tantalizing enigma.

Lecoq, indeed, had resolved to renounce all other claims upon his time, and to devote himself entirely to the study of this case.

" Henceforth," he said to M. Segmuller, " I also constitute myself a prisoner; and although he will not see me, I shall not lose sight of him! "

CHAPTER XXXII

Between the cell occupied by May and the roof of the prison was a loft, the ceiling of which was so low, that a man of average height could not stand upright in the room. A few straggling rays of sunlight peering through the interstices of the wall relieved the dense gloom but slightly.

In this unattractive abode, Lecoq, one fine morning, established himself.

It was at the hour when the prisoner was taking his daily walk, under the surveillance of two keepers, and the zealous detective could, without restraint, proceed to his work of installation.

Armed with a pickaxe, he removed two or three stones from the floor, making a small aperture, and then set himself at work to make another opening through the timbers below.

The hole which he made was in the form of a tunnel. Very large at the top, it had dwindled to an opening not more than two-thirds of an inch in diameter when it pierced the ceiling of the cell below.

The place where this aperture was made had been chosen so skilfully in advance that it was in the midst of some stains and patches of mould; hence, it was impossible for the prisoner to detect it from below.

While Lecoq was at work, the keeper of the prison and Gevrol, who had insisted upon accompanying him, appeared upon the threshold of the loft, laughing and sneering.

"So this is to be your observatory, Monsieur Lecoq?" remarked Gevrol.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"You will not be very comfortable here."

"I shall be less uncomfortable than you suppose. I have brought a large blanket, and I shall stretch myself out upon the floor and sleep here."

"So that, night and day, you will have your eye on the prisoner?"

"Yes, night and day."

"Without giving yourself time to eat or drink?" inquired Gevrol.

"Pardon! Father Absinthe will bring me my meals, execute any commissions I may have, and take my place on guard, if necessary."

The jealous general laughed loudly; but the laugh was a trifle constrained.

"Well, I pity you," he said.

"Very possibly."

"Do you know what you will look like with your eye glued to that hole?"

"Say it! You need be under no constraint."

"Ah, well! you will look like one of those silly naturalists who put all sorts of little insects under a magnifying glass, and spend their lives in watching them."

Lecoq had finished his work; he rose from the floor.

"No comparison could be more just, General," he replied. "You have guessed it. To these naturalists, of whom you speak so slightingly, I owe the idea I am about putting into execution. By dint of studying these little creatures—as you say—under a microscope, these patient and gifted men are enabled to discover the habits and the instincts of the insect world. Very well. What they can do with an insect, I will do with a man!"

"Oh ho!" said the keeper, considerably astonished.

"Yes, that is my plan, Monsieur," continued Lecoq. "I wish to learn this prisoner's secret; I will have it. I have sworn it, and I shall have it, because, however strong his courage may be, he will have his moments of weakness, and then I shall be there. I shall be there; if his will fails him, if believing himself alone he lets his mask fall for a moment, if he forgets his part for an instant, if some indiscreet word escapes him in his slumber, if despair elicits a groan, a gesture, a look —I shall be there."

The implacable resolution that vibrated in the young man's voice made a deep impression upon the keeper.

For an instant he was a believer in Lecoq's theory; and he was impressed by the strangeness of this conflict between a prisoner, determined to preserve the secret of his personality, and the prosecution, equally determined to wrest it from him.

"Upon my word! my boy, you are not wanting in courage and energy."

"Although it is misdirected," growled Gevrol.

He made this remark very slowly and deliberately; but in his secret soul he was by no means convinced of its truth. Faith is contagious, and he was troubled,

in spite of himself, by Lecoq's imperturbable assurance.

What if this *débutant* in his profession should be right, and he, Gevrol, the oracle of the prefecture, wrong! What shame and ridicule would be his portion!

But once again he inwardly swore that this inexperienced man could be no match for an old veteran, and he added:

"The chief of police must have more money than he knows what to do with, to pay two men for such a nonsensical job as this."

Lecoq did not reply to this slighting remark. For more than a fortnight the general had improved every opportunity of making himself disagreeable so well, that the young man doubted his power to control his temper if the discussion were continued.

It would be better to keep silence, and to work and wait for success. To succeed! that would be revenge enough!

Moreover, he was impatient to see these unwelcome visitors depart. Perhaps he believed that Gevrol was quite capable of attracting the prisoner's attention by some unusual sound.

As soon as they went away, Lecoq hastily spread his blanket, and stretched himself out upon it in such a position that he could alternately apply his eye and his ear to the aperture.

In this position he had an admirable view of the cell below. He could see the door, the bed, the table, the chair; only the small space near the window and the window itself were beyond his range of observation.

He had scarcely completed his survey, when he

heard the bolts rattle; the prisoner was returning from his walk.

He seemed in excellent spirits, and was just completing what was, undoubtedly, a very interesting story, since the keeper lingered for a moment to hear the conclusion. Lecoq was delighted with the success of his experiment. He could hear as easily as he could see. Each sound reached his ear distinctly; he had not lost a single word of the recital, which was amusing, but rather coarse.

The guard departed. May walked across his cell a few times, then took up his volume of "Béranger," and for an hour or more seemed completely engrossed in its contents. Finally, he threw himself down upon the bed.

He remained there until the hour of his evening repast, when he rose and ate with an excellent appetite. Then he resumed the study of his book, and did not go to bed until the lights were extinguished.

Lecoq knew that during the night his eyes would not serve him, but, for all that, he hoped that some tell-tale word would escape the prisoner.

In this expectation he was disappointed. May tossed restlessly upon his pallet; he sighed, and one might have thought that he was sobbing, but not a syllable escaped his lips.

He remained in bed until very late the next morning; but on hearing the bell sound the hour of breakfast, eleven o'clock, he sprang from his couch with a bound, and after capering about his cell for a few moments, he began to sing, in a loud and cheerful voice, the old ditty:

'Diogene
Sous ton manteau
Libre et content, je ris, je bois, sans gene——"

He did not cease his singing until the keeper entered his cell to bring him his breakfast.

The day differed in no respect from the one that had preceded it, nor did the night. The same might be said of the next day and of the days which followed it.

To sing, to eat, to sleep, to care for his hands and his nails—such was the life of the so-called buffoon. His manner, which never varied, was that of a naturally cheerful man, terribly bored.

Such was the perfection of this enigmatical person's acting, that Lecoq, after six days and nights of constant surveillance, had detected nothing decisive, nor even surprising.

Yet he did not despair. He had noticed that, every morning, while the employees of the prison were busy in distributing the food of the prisoners, this man repeated his song of Diogenes.

"Evidently this song is a signal," Lecoq said to himself. "What is going on there by the window that I cannot see? I will know to-morrow."

The following morning he arranged that May should be taken on his morning walk at half-past ten o'clock, and he then insisted that the keeper should accompany him to the prisoner's cell.

That worthy functionary was not very well pleased with this change in the usual order of things.

"What do you wish to show me?" he asked. "What is it that is so very curious?"

"Perhaps nothing," replied Lecoq; "perhaps something of great importance."

Eleven o'clock sounding soon after, he began singing the prisoner's song:

"Diogene
Sous ton manteau——"

He had scarcely finished the second line, when a bit of bread, no larger than a bullet, adroitly thrown through the window, dropped at his feet.

A thunder-bolt falling in May's cell would not have terrified the superintendent as much as did this inoffensive projectile.

He stood in silent dismay, his mouth wide open, his eyes starting from their sockets, as if he distrusted the evidence of his own senses.

What a disgrace! An instant before he would have staked his life upon the inviolability of the secret cells. He beheld his prison dishonored—sneered at.

"A communication! a communication!" he repeated, with a horrified air.

Quick as lightning, Lecoq picked up the missile and held it up in triumph.

"I said this man was in communication with his friends," he murmured.

Lecoq's evident delight changed the superintendent's stupor into fury.

"Ah! my prisoners are writing!" he exclaimed, wild with passion. "My guards are acting as postmen! By my faith, this matter shall be looked into."

He rushed toward the door; Lecoq stopped him.

"What are you going to do, Monsieur?" he asked.

"I am going to call all the employees of this prison together, and inform them that there is a traitor among them, and that I must know who he is, as I wish to make an example of him. And if, in twenty-four hours from now, the culprit has not been discovered, every man connected with this prison shall be removed."

Again he started to leave the room, and Lecoq, this time, had almost to use force to detain him.

"Be calm, sir; be calm," he entreated.

"I *will* punish——"

"Yes, yes, I understand that, but wait until you have regained your self-possession. It is possible that the guilty party may be one of the prisoners who aid in the distribution of food every morning."

"What does that matter?"

"Pardon! It matters a great deal. If you noise this discovery abroad, if you say a single word about it, we shall never discover the truth. The traitor will not be fool enough to confess his guilt. We must be silent and wait. We will keep a close watch and detect the culprit in the very act."

These objections were so sensible that the keeper yielded.

"So be it," he sighed. "I will be patient. But let us see the missive that was enclosed in this morsel of bread."

Lecoq would not consent to this proposition.

"I warned Monsieur Segmuller that there would probably be some new developments this morning; and he must be waiting for me in his office. I must reserve the pleasure of opening this envelope for him."

The superintendent's face clouded. He would have given a great deal could he have kept this affair a secret; but that was entirely out of the question.

"Let us go and find the judge, then," said he, despondently.

They started, and on their way Lecoq endeavored to convince the worthy man that he was quite wrong to deplore a circumstance which would be of incalculable benefit to the prosecution. Had he, until now, supposed himself more cunning than his prisoners? What an illusion! Had not the ingenuity of the pris-

oner always defied, and will it not always defy, the *finesse* of his guardians?

But they had reached the office, and at the sight of them, M. Segmuller and his clerk both sprang from their seats. They read startling news in the face of the young detective.

"What is it?" demanded the judge, eagerly.

Lecoq's sole response was to place the precious morsel of bread upon the desk. The judge opened it.

It contained a tiny scrap of the thinnest tissue-paper.

M. Segmuller unfolded it, and smoothed it upon the palm of his hand. As soon as he glanced at it, his brow contracted.

"Ah! this note is written in cipher," he exclaimed, striking his clinched fist violently upon his desk.

"We must not lose patience," said Lecoq, tranquilly.

He took the slip of paper, and read aloud the numbers that were inscribed upon it. They were as follows, separated by commas:

235, 15, 3, 8, 25, 2, 16, 208, 5, 360, 4, 36, 19, 7, 14, 118, 84, 23, 9, 40, 11, 99.

"And so we shall learn nothing from this note," murmured the keeper.

"Why not?" responded the smiling clerk. "There is no system of cipher which cannot be read with a little skill and patience. There are some people who make it their business."

"You are right," approved Lecoq. "And I myself once had a knack at it."

"What!" exclaimed the judge; "do you hope to find the key to this cipher?"

"With time, yes."

He was about placing the paper in his breast-pocket, but the judge begged him to examine it further.

He did so; and after a little, his face brightened, and, striking his forehead with his open palm, he cried:

"I have found it!"

An exclamation of surprise, and possibly of incredulity, escaped the judge, the keeper, and the clerk.

"At least I think so," added Lecoq, more cautiously. "The prisoner and his accomplice have, if I am not mistaken, adopted the system called the double book cipher. This system is very simple.

"The correspondents first agree upon some particular book, and both obtain a copy of the same edition.

"What if one desires to communicate with the other?

"He opens the book hap-hazard, and begins by writing the number of the page.

"Then he must seek, upon that page, the words necessary to give expression to his thought. If the first word which he desires to write is the twentieth word printed on the page, he writes the number 20; then he begins to count one, two, three, until he finds the next word that he wishes to use. If this word happens to be the sixth, he writes the figure 6; and he continues in this way until he has written all he wishes to communicate.

"You see, now, how the correspondent who receives this mission must begin. He finds the page indicated, and each figure represents a word."

"Nothing could be more clear," said the judge, approvingly.

"If this note that I hold here," pursued Lecoq, "had been exchanged between two persons who were at liberty, it would be folly to attempt its translation. This

simple system is the only one which has completely baffled the efforts of the curious, simply because there is no way of ascertaining the book agreed upon.

"But such is not the case here; May is a prisoner, and he has but one book in his possession, 'The Songs of Béranger.' Let this book be sent for——"

The keeper was actually enthusiastic.

"I will run and fetch it myself," he interrupted.

But Lecoq, with a gesture, detained him.

"Above all, Monsieur, take care that May does not discover his book has been tampered with. If he has returned from his promenade, make some excuse to have him sent out of his cell again; and do not allow him to return there while we are using his book."

"Oh, trust me!" replied the superintendent.

He left the room, and so intense was his zeal, that he was back again in less than a quarter of an hour, bringing in triumph a little volume in 32mo.

With a trembling hand, Lecoq opened to page 235 and began to count.

The fifteenth word on the page was *I;* the third after, was the word *have;* the eighth following that, was *told;* the twenty-fifth, *her;* the second, *your;* the sixteenth, *wishes.*

Hence, the meaning of those six numbers was:

"I have told her your wishes."

The three persons who had witnessed this display of shrewdness could not restrain their admiration.

"Bravo! Lecoq," exclaimed the judge.

"I will no longer bet a hundred to one on May," thought the clerk.

But Lecoq was still busily engaged in deciphering the missive, and soon, in a voice trembling with grati-

fied vanity, he read the entire note aloud. It was as follows:

"I have told her your wishes; she submits. Our safety is assured; we are waiting your orders to act. Hope! Courage!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

What a disappointment, after the fever of anxiety and expectation that had held the witnesses of this scene motionless and breathless!

This short and unintelligible epistle afforded no information whatever upon the subject in which all present were so deeply interested.

The light of hope which had sparkled in M. Segmuller's eye a moment before, faded; and Goquet returned to his former opinion, that the prisoner had the advantage over his accusers.

"How unfortunate," remarked the superintendent, with a shade of sarcasm in his voice, "that so much trouble and such marvellous penetration should be wasted!"

Lecoq, whose confidence seemed unalterable, regarding him with a bantering air, replied:

"So Monsieur thinks I have wasted my time! Such is not my opinion. This scrap of paper undeniably proves that if any person has been mistaken in regard to the identity of the prisoner, it certainly was not I."

"Very well. Monsieur Gevrol and I may have been mistaken; no one is infallible. But have you learned anything more than you knew before? Have you made any progress?"

"Why, yes, Monsieur. Now that people know the

prisoner is not what he pretends to be, instead of annoying and hampering me, perhaps they will aid to discover who he really is."

Lecoq's tone, and his allusion to the difficulties he had encountered, wounded the keeper. But precisely because he felt the blood mount to his forehead under this just reproof, he resolved to cut short this discussion with an inferior.

"You are right," said he, sarcastically. "This May must be a very great and illustrious personage. Only, my dear Monsieur Lecoq (for there is an only), do me the favor to explain how such an important personage could disappear and the police not be advised of it? A man of rank, such as you suppose this prisoner to be, usually has a family, friends, relatives, *protégés*, and extended connections; and yet not a single person has lifted his voice during the three weeks that this May has been under my charge! Come, admit that you have not thought of this."

The keeper had just advanced the only serious objection that could be found against the theory advanced by the prosecution.

But Lecoq had seen it before. It had not been once out of his mind; and he had racked his brain to find some satisfactory explanation.

Undoubtedly he would have made some angry retort, as people are wont to do when their antagonists discover the weak spot in their armor, had not M. Segmuller interposed.

"All these recriminations do no good," he remarked, calmly; "we can make no progress while these continue. It would be much wiser to decide upon the course to be pursued under the present circumstances."

Thus reminded of the present situation of affairs, the young man smiled; all his rancor was forgotten.

"There is, I think, but one course to pursue," he replied, modestly; "and I believe it will be successful by reason of its simplicity. We must substitute a communication of our own composition for this one. That will not be at all difficult, since I have the key to the cipher. I shall only be obliged to purchase a similar volume of Bèranger's songs; and May, believing that he is addressing his accomplice, will respond in all sincerity, and will reveal everything, perhaps——"

"Pardon!" interrupted the keeper, "how will you obtain possession of his reply?"

"Ah! you ask me too much. I know the way in which his letters have reached him. For the rest, I will watch and find a way; never fear!"

Goquet could not conceal an approving grin. If he had happened to have ten francs on hand, he would have risked them all on Lecoq just then.

"First, I will replace this missive by one of my own composition. To-morrow, at the breakfast hour, if the prisoner gives the signal, Father Absinthe will throw the morsel of bread enclosing the note through the window, while I from my observatory watch the effect."

He was so delighted with this plan that he at once rang the bell, and when the messenger appeared, he gave him a ten-sous piece and requested him to go at once and purchase some of the thinnest tissue-paper.

When he was in possession of the paper, which was apparently exactly like that upon which the note was written, he seated himself at the clerk's desk, and, armed with the volume of Béranger's poems, he began the composition of his missive, copying as closely as

possible the forms of the figures used by the unknown correspondent.

This task did not occupy him more than ten minutes. Fearing to commit some blunder, he reproduced the words of the original letter, with but little change in the words themselves, but with an entire change of meaning.

His note read as follows:

"I have told her your wishes; she does not submit. Our safety is threatened. We are awaiting your orders. I tremble."

When this was completed, he rolled up the paper, and enclosing it in the fragment of bread, he said:

"To-morrow we shall learn something."

To-morrow! The twenty-four hours that separated the young man from the decisive moment seemed a century. What expedients he resorted to, in order to hasten the slow passage of time!

He explained to Father Absinthe clearly and minutely what he would have to do, and, sure of being understood, and certain that he would be obeyed, he went back to his loft.

The evening seemed long, and the night interminable, for he found it impossible to close an eyelid.

He rose at daybreak and saw that his prisoner was awake and was sitting on the foot of the bed. Soon he sprang up and paced restlessly to and fro. He was evidently in an unusually agitated frame of mind; he gesticulated wildly, and at intervals certain words—always the same words—escaped his lips.

"What misery! My God! what misery!" he repeated again and again.

"Ah! my boy," thought Lecoq, "you are anxious about the daily letter which you failed to receive. Pa-

tience, patience! One of my writing will soon arrive."

At last the young detective heard the stir that always preceded the distribution of food. People were running to and fro, *sabots* clicked noisily in the corridors, the guards were talking loudly.

Eleven o'clock was sounded by the old clock; the prisoner began his song:

"Diogene
Sous ton manteau,
Libre et content——"

He did not finish the third line; the slight sound caused by the fragment of bread as it fell upon the stone floor made him pause suddenly.

Lecoq, at the opening in the ceiling above, was holding his breath, and watching with all his eyes.

He did not miss a single movement of the prisoner—not so much as the quiver of an eyelid.

May looked first at the window, then all about him, as if it were impossible for him to explain the arrival of this projectile.

It was not until some little time had elapsed that he decided to pick it up. He held it in the hollow of his hand, and examined it with apparent curiosity. His features expressed the most profound surprise. One would have sworn that he was innocent of all complicity.

Soon a smile appeared upon his lips. With a slight shrug of the shoulders, which might be interpreted: "Am I a fool?" and with a rapid movement, he broke open the morsel of bread. The sight of the paper which it contained seemed to amaze him.

"What does all this mean?" wondered Lecoq.

The prisoner had opened the note, and was examining, with knitted brows, the figures which were apparently destitute of all meaning to him.

Then suddenly he rushed to the door of his cell, and, hammering upon it with his fists, he cried:

"Here! guard! here!"

A keeper came running, in answer to the summons. Lecoq heard his footsteps in the corridor.

"What do you want?" the man cried, through the opening in the cell door.

"I wish to speak to the judge."

"Very well. He shall be informed."

"Immediately, if you please. I wish to make some revelations."

"He shall be sent for immediately."

Lecoq waited to hear no more.

He tore down the narrow staircase leading from the loft, and rushed to the Palais de Justice to tell M. Segmuller what had happened.

"What can this mean?" he wondered, as he went. "Are we indeed approaching a *dénouement?* This much is certain, the prisoner was not deceived by my note. He could decipher it only with the aid of his volume of 'Béranger;' he has not touched the book, therefore he has not read the note."

M. Segmuller was no less amazed than the young detective. Together they hastened to the prison, followed by the clerk, who was the judge's inevitable shadow.

They had reached the end of the *galerie d'instruction*, when they encountered the keeper, who was coming all in a flutter, greatly excited by that important word, "revelation."

The worthy official undoubtedly wished to make

known his opinion; but the judge checked him by saying:

"I know all about it; and I am coming."

When they had reached the narrow corridor leading to the secret cells, Lecoq passed on in advance of the rest of the party.

He said to himself that by stealing upon him unawares, he might possibly find the prisoner engaged in surreptitiously reading the note; and that, in any case, he would have an opportunity to glance at the interior of the cell.

May was seated by the table, his head resting upon his hands.

At the grating of the bolt, drawn by the hand of the head keeper himself, he rose, smoothed his hair, and remained standing in a respectful attitude, apparently waiting for the visitors to address him.

"Did you send for me?" inquired the judge.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"You have, I understand, some revelation to make to me."

"I have something of importance to tell you."

"Very well! these gentlemen will retire."

M. Segmuller had already turned to Lecoq and the keeper to request them to withdraw, when a movement from the prisoner checked his words.

"It is not necessary," May remarked; "I am, on the contrary, very well pleased to speak before everybody."

"Speak, then."

May did not oblige him to repeat the order. He assumed a three-quarters position, inflated his chest, threw his head back, as he had done from the very beginning of his examinations when he wished to make a display of his eloquence.

"It shall be for you to say, gentlemen, whether I am or am not an honest man. The profession matters little. One can, perhaps, be the clown of a travelling show, and yet be an honest man—a man of honor."

"Oh, spare us your reflections!"

"Very well, Monsieur, that suits me exactly. To be brief, then, here is a little paper which was thrown into my cell a few moments ago. There are numbers upon it which may mean something; but I have examined it, and it is all Greek to me."

He handed it to the judge, and added:

"It was rolled up in a bit of bread."

The violence of this unexpected blow struck his visitors dumb; but the prisoner, without seeming to notice the effect he had produced, continued:

"I suppose that the person who threw it made a mistake in the window. I know very well that it is a mean piece of business to denounce a companion in prison. It is cowardly; and one is very likely to get himself into trouble; but a man must be prudent, when he is accused of being an assassin as I am, and when he is threatened with a great unpleasantness."

A terribly significant gesture of severing the head from the body left no doubt whatever of what he meant by an unpleasantness.

"And yet I am innocent," he murmured.

The judge, by this time, had recovered the full possession of his faculties. He concentrated in one glance all the power of his will, and, looking intently at the prisoner:

"You lie!" he said, slowly; "it was for you that this note was intended."

"For me! Then I must be the greatest of fools, or why should I have called you to show it to you? For

me? In that case, why did I not keep it? Who knew, who could know that I had received it?"

All this was said with such a marvellous semblance of honesty, his gaze was so frank and open, his voice rang so true, his reasoning was so specious, that the keeper's doubts returned.

"And what if I could prove that you are uttering a falsehood?" insisted M. Segmuller. "What if I could prove it, here and now?"

"You would be the liar! Oh! Monsieur, pardon! Excuse me; I mean——"

But the judge was not in a frame of mind to stickle for nicety of expression.

He motioned May to be silent; and, turning to Lecoq, he said:

"Show the prisoner that you have discovered the key to his secret correspondence."

A sudden change passed over the features of the accused.

"Ah! it is this agent of police who has found it," he said, in an altered tone. "The same agent who assures me that I am a *grand seigneur*."

He turned disdainfully to Lecoq, and added:

"Under these circumstances, there is no help for me. When the police are absolutely determined that a man shall be guilty, it will be proved that he is guilty; everybody knows that. And when a prisoner receives no letters, an agent, who wishes such to be the case, knows how to send them to him."

There was such an expression of contempt upon the prisoner's face that Lecoq could scarcely refrain from making an angry reply.

He restrained this desire, however, in obedience to a warning gesture from the judge, and, taking from

the table the volume of Béranger, he endeavored to prove to the prisoner that each number in the note corresponded to a word on the page indicated, and that all these words formed an intelligible whole.

This overpowering evidence did not seem to trouble May in the least. After expressing the same admiration for this novel system of correspondence that a child would show for a new toy, he declared his belief that no one could equal the police in such machinations.

What could one do in the face of such obstinacy?

M. Segmuller did not even attempt to argue the point, and retired, followed by his companions.

Until they reached the superintendent's office, he did not utter a word; then he threw himself down into an arm-chair, saying:

"We must confess ourselves beaten. This man will always remain what he is now—an enigma."

"But what is the meaning of the comedy he has just played? I do not understand it," said the keeper.

"Why," responded Lecoq, "do you not see that he hoped to persuade the judge that the first note had been written by me, in order to convince him of the truth of my theory? It was a hazardous project; but the importance of the result to be gained must have emboldened him to attempt it. Had he succeeded, I should have been disgraced; and he would have remained May—without further molestation, in the eyes of the world. But how could he know that I had discovered his correspondence, and that I was watching him from the loft above? That is something which will never be explained, probably."

The keeper and the detective exchanged glances of mutual distrust.

"Eh! eh!" thought the director, "why, indeed, might not that note which fell at my feet the other day have been the work of this crafty fellow? His Father Absinthe might have served him in the first instance as well as he did in the last."

"Who knows," Lecoq was saying to himself, "but what this worthy keeper has confided everything to Gevrol? If he has, my jealous general would not scruple to play me such a trick as this."

"Ah!" exclaimed Goquet, "it is really a pity that such a well-mounted comedy did not succeed."

These words startled the judge from his revery.

"A shameful farce," he said, "and one that I would never have authorized, had I not been blinded by a mad longing to arrive at the truth. It brings the sacred majesty of justice into contempt to make her the accomplice of such base subterfuges!"

Lecoq, on hearing these words, became white with wrath, and a tear of rage glittered in his eye.

It was the second affront within an hour. Insulted, first by the prisoner, afterward by the judge.

"I am defeated," thought he. "I must confess it. It is Fate. Ah! if I had but succeeded!"

Disappointment alone had impelled M. Segmuller to utter these harsh words; they were harsh and unjust; he regretted them, and did all in his power to make Lecoq forget them.

For they met every day after this unfortunate incident; and every morning, when the young detective came to give an account of his investigations, they had a long conference.

For Lecoq still continued his efforts; still labored with an obstinacy intensified by constant sneers; still pursued his investigations with that cold and deter-

mined anger which keeps one's faculties on the alert for years.

But the judge was utterly discouraged.

"We must abandon this attempt," said he. "All the means of detection have been exhausted. I give it up. The prisoner will go to the Court of Assizes, and will be acquitted or condemned under the name of May. I will trouble myself no more about the affair."

He *said* this, but his anxiety, the disappointment caused by his defeat, the sarcastic remarks of his acquaintances, and his perplexity in regard to the course he had best pursue, so affected his health that he became really ill—so ill that he was confined to his bed.

Eight days had elapsed since he had left his house, when one morning Lecoq called to inquire for him.

"You see, my good fellow, that this mysterious murderer is fatal to us judges. Ah! he is too much for us; he will preserve his identity."

"Possibly," replied Lecoq. "There is but one way left to gain his secret: we must allow him to escape, and then track him to his lair."

CHAPTER XXXIV

This last expedient, proposed by Lecoq, was not of his own invention, and not by any means new.

In every age, the police force has, when it became necessary to do so, closed its eyes and opened the prison doors for the release of suspected parties.

And not a few, dazzled by liberty and ignorance of any *espionage*, betray themselves.

All the prisoners are not, like Lavalette, protected

by royal connivance; and we might enumerate many individuals who, like the unfortunate Georges d'Etcherony, have been released, only to be rearrested, when they have made a confession of guilt to those who had wormed themselves into their confidence.

Poor D'Etcherony! He supposed that he had eluded the vigilance of his guardians. When he discovered his error, and became aware of the mistake he had made, he sent a bullet through his own heart.

Alas! he survived this terrible wound long enough to learn that one of his own familiar friends had betrayed him, and to cast in his teeth the insulting word "traitor!"

It is, however, very seldom, and only in special cases, and as a last resort, that such a plan is adopted.

And the authorities consent to it only when they hope to derive some important advantage, such as the capture of a whole band of malefactors.

The police arrest, perhaps, one of the band. In spite of his wickedness, a sense of honor makes him, not unfrequently, refuse to name his accomplices. What is to be done? Is he alone to be tried and condemned?

No. He is set at liberty; but like the falcon who flies away with a thread attached to his foot, he drags after him at the end of his chain a crowd of close observers.

And at the very moment when he is boasting of his good luck and audacity to the comrades he has rejoined, the whole company find themselves caught in the snare.

M. Segmuller knew all this, and much more; yet, on hearing Lecoq's proposition, he turned to him angrily, and exclaimed:

"Are you mad?"

"I think not."

"A most foolish scheme!"

"Why so, Monsieur? After the assassination of the husband and wife Chaboiseau, the police succeeded in capturing the guilty parties, you must recollect. But a robbery of one hundred and fifty thousand francs in bank-notes and coin had also been committed. This large sum of money could not be found; and the murderers obstinately refused to divulge where they had concealed it. It would be a fortune for them, if they escaped the gallows; but, meanwhile, the children of the victims were ruined. Monsieur Patrigent, the judge of instruction, was the first—I will not say to counsel—but to succeed in convincing the authorities that it would be well to set one of these wretches at liberty. They followed his advice; and three days later the culprit was surprised disinterring his booty from a bed of mushrooms. I believe that our prisoner——"

"Enough!" interrupted M. Segmuller. "I wish to hear no more about this affair. I have, it seems to me, forbidden you to broach the subject."

The young detective hung his head with a hypocritical air of submission.

But he was all the while watching the judge out of the corner of his eye and noting his agitation.

"I can afford to be silent," he thought; "he will return to the subject of his own accord."

He did, in fact, return to it only a moment afterward.

"Suppose this man was released from prison, what would you do?"

"What would I do, Monsieur! I would follow him

like grim death; I would not let him go out of my sight; I would live in his shadow."

"And do you suppose that he would not discover this surveillance?"

"I should take my precautions."

"He would recognize you at a single glance."

"No, Monsieur, because I shall disguise myself. A detective who is not capable of equalling the most skilful actor in the matter of make-up is no better than an ordinary policeman. I have practised only for a year in making my face and my person whatever I wish them to be, but I can, at will, be old or young, dark or light, a man of the world, or the most frightful ruffian of the *barrières*."

"I was not aware that you possessed this talent, Monsieur Lecoq."

"Oh! I am very far from the perfection of which I dream. I venture to engage, however, that before three days have elapsed, I can appear before you and converse with you for half an hour without being recognized."

M. Segmuller made no response; and it was evident to Lecoq that the judge had offered these objections in the hope of seeing them destroyed, rather than with the wish to see them prevail.

"I think, my poor boy, that you are strangely deceived. We have both been equally anxious to penetrate the mystery that shrouds this strange man. We have both admired his wonderful acuteness—for his sagacity *is* wonderful; so marvellous, indeed, that it exceeds the limits of imagination. Do you believe that a man of his penetration will betray himself like an ordinary prisoner? He will understand at once, if

he is set at liberty, that this freedom is given him only that we may use it against him."

"I do not deceive myself, sir. May will divine the truth. I know that but too well."

"Very well; then what will be the use of attempting what you propose?"

"I have reflected on the subject, and have come to this conclusion: This man will find himself strangely embarrassed, even when he is free. He will not have a sou in his pocket; he has no trade. What will he do to make a living? But one must eat. He may struggle along for a while, but he will not be willing to suffer long. Days when he is without a shelter, and without a morsel of bread, he will remember that he is rich. Will he not seek to recover his property? Yes, certainly. He will try to obtain money; he will endeavor to communicate with his friends. I shall wait until that day comes. Months will elapse, and, seeing no sign of my surveillance, he will venture some decisive step; and I will step forward with a warrant for his arrest in my hand."

"And what if he should leave Paris? What if he should flee to some foreign country?"

"I will follow him. One of my aunts has left me a small country property, that is worth about twelve thousand francs. I will sell it, and I will spend the last sou, if necessary, in pursuit of my revenge. This man has outwitted me as if I were a child, and I will have my turn."

"And what if he should slip through your fingers?"

Lecoq laughed like a man who was sure of himself.

"Let him try," he exclaimed. "I will answer for him with my life."

Unfortunately, Lecoq's enthusiasm made the judge all the colder.

"Your idea is a good one, sir," he responded. "But you must understand that law and justice will take no part in such intrigues. All I can promise you is my tacit approval. Go, therefore, to the prefecture; see your superiors——"

With a really despairing gesture, the young man interrupted M. Segmuller.

"What good would it do for me to make such a proposition?" he exclaimed. "They would not only refuse my request, but they would give me my dismissal, if my name is not already erased from the roll."

"You dismissed, your name erased after you have conducted this case so well?"

"Alas! sir, everyone is not of that opinion. Tongues have been wagging busily during the week of your illness. My enemies have heard somehow of the last scene we had with May. Ah, yes! that man is very clever. They all say now that it was *I*, who, with a hope of advancement, imagined all the romantic details of this affair. They declare that there can be no doubt of the prisoner's identity except those of my own invention. To hear them talk at the depot one might suppose that I invented the scene that took place in the Widow Chupin's cabin; imagined the accomplices; suborned the witnesses; manufactured the articles found in the dwelling; wrote that first note as well as the second; duped Father Absinthe, and mystified the keeper."

"The devil!" exclaimed M. Segmuller; "in that case what do they think of me?"

The wily detective's face assumed an expression of intense embarrassment.

"Ah! sir," he replied, with a great show of reluctance, "they pretend that you have allowed yourself to be deceived by me, that you have not properly weighed the proofs which I have adduced."

A fleeting crimson tinged M. Segmuller's forehead.

"In a word," said he, "they think I am your dupe—and a fool."

The recollection of certain smiles that he had encountered in passing through the corridors, and of divers allusions which had stung him to the quick, decided him.

"Very well, I will aid you, Monsieur Lecoq," he exclaimed. "I would like you to triumph over your enemies. I will get up at once and accompany you to the palace. I will see the attorney-general myself; I will speak to him; I will plead your cause for you."

Lecoq's joy was intense.

Never, no, never, had he dared to obtain such aid.

Ah! after this, M. Segmuller might ask him to go through fire for him if he chose, and he would be ready to precipitate himself into the flames.

Still he was prudent enough, and he had sufficient control over his feelings to preserve a sober face. This was one of the victories that must be concealed, under penalty of losing all the benefits to be derived from it.

Certainly the young detective had said nothing that was untrue, but there are different ways of presenting the truth, and he had, perhaps, exaggerated a trifle in order to make the judge share his rancor, and make him an earnest auxiliary. M. Segmuller, however, after the exclamation wrested from him by his adroitly wounded vanity—after the first explosion of anger—regained his accustomed calmness.

"I suppose," he remarked to Lecoq, "that you have

decided what stratagem must be employed to lull the prisoner's suspicions in case he is permitted to escape."

"I have not once thought of that, I must confess. Besides, what good would any such stratagem do? That man knows too well that he is the object of suspicion and anxious surveillance not to hold himself on the *qui vive*. But there is one precaution which I believe is absolutely necessary; indispensable indeed. In fact, it appears to me an essential condition of success."

Lecoq seemed to find so much difficulty in choosing his words, that the judge felt it necessary to aid him.

"Let me hear this precaution," said he.

"It consists, sir, in giving an order to transfer May to another prison. Oh, it matters not which one; any one you choose to select."

"Why, if you please?"

"Because, during the few days that precede his release it is absolutely necessary that he should hold no communication with his friends outside, and that he should be unable to warn his accomplice."

This proposition seemed to amaze M. Segmuller exceedingly.

"Then you think that he is poorly guarded where he is?" he inquired.

"No, Monsieur, I did not say that. I am persuaded that since the affair of the note the keeper has redoubled his vigilance. But still, where he is now, this mysterious murderer certainly receives news from outside; we have had material evidence—unanswerable proofs of that fact—and besides——"

He paused, evidently fearing to give expression to his thought, like a person who feels that what he is about to say will be regarded as an enormity.

"And besides?" insisted the judge.

"Ah, well, sir! I will be perfectly frank with you. I find that Gevrol enjoys too much liberty in the depot; he is perfectly at home there; he comes and goes, and no one ever thinks of asking what he is doing, where he is going, or what he wishes there. No pass is necessary for his admission, and he can make the head keeper, who is a very honest man, see stars in the heavens at midday if he chooses. And I distrust Gevrol."

"Oh! Monsieur Lecoq!"

"Yes, I know very well that it is a bold accusation, but a man is not master of his presentiments, and I distrust Gevrol. Did the prisoner know or did he *not* know, that I was watching him from the loft, and that I had discovered his secret correspondence? Evidently he did know this; the last scene with him proves it."

"Such is also my opinion."

"But how could he have known it? He could not have discovered it unaided. For eight days I endured tortures to find the solution of this problem. All my trouble was wasted. Gevrol's intervention would explain it all."

M. Segmuller, at the mere supposition, turned pale with anger.

"Ah! if I could really believe that!" he exclaimed; "if I were sure of it! Have you any proofs?"

The young man shook his head.

"If I had my hands full of proofs I should know enough not to open them. Would it not ruin my whole future? I must, if I succeed, expect many such acts of treachery. There is hatred and rivalry in every profession. And mark this, Monsieur—I do not

doubt Gevrol's honesty. If a hundred thousand francs were counted out upon the table and offered to him, he would not release a prisoner. But he would rob justice of a dozen criminals in the mere hope of injuring me, whom he thinks likely to overshadow him."

How many things these words explained! To how many unsolved enigmas did they give the key! But the judge had not time to follow out this course of thought.

"That will do," said he; "go into the drawing-room for a moment. I will dress and join you there. I will send for a carriage; I must make haste if I wish to see the procureur-general to-day."

Usually very particular about the minutiæ of his toilette, this morning the judge was dressed and in the drawing-room in less than a quarter of an hour.

As soon as he entered the apartment where Lecoq was impatiently awaiting him, he said, briefly:

"Let us start."

They were just entering the carriage, when a man, whose handsome livery proclaimed him a servitor in an aristocratic household, hastily approached M. Segmuller.

"Ah! Jean, is it you?" said the judge. "How is your master?"

"Improving, Monsieur. He sent me to ask how you were, and to inquire how that affair was progressing."

"There has been no change in that since I wrote him last. Give him my compliments, and tell him that I am out again."

The servant bowed. Lecoq took a seat beside the judge, and the *fiacre* started.

"That fellow is D'Escorval's *valet de chambre*," remarked M. Segmuller.

"The judge who——"

"Precisely. He sent his man to me two or three days ago, to ascertain what we were doing with our mysterious May."

"Then Monsieur d'Escorval is interested in the case?"

"Prodigiously! I conclude it is because he opened the prosecution, and because the case rightfully belongs to him. Perhaps he regrets that it passed out of his hands, and thinks that he could have managed the *instruction* better himself. We would have done better with it if we could. I would give a good deal to see him in my place."

But this change would not have been at all to Lecoq's taste.

"That stern and forbidding judge would never have granted the concessions I have just obtained from M. Segmuller," he thought.

He had, indeed, good reason to congratulate himself; for M. Segmuller did not break his promise. He was one of those men who, when they have once decided upon a plan, never rest until it has been carried into execution.

That very day he induced the authorities to adopt Lecoq's suggestion; and the details only remained to be decided upon.

That same afternoon, the Widow Chupin received her conditional release.

There was no difficulty in regard to Polyte. He, in the meantime, had been brought before the court under a charge of theft; and, to his great astonishment,

had heard himself condemned to thirteen months' imprisonment.

After this M. Segmuller had nothing to do but to wait; and this was much more easy to do, since the coming of the Easter holidays gave him an opportunity to seek a little rest and recreation in the provinces, with his family.

He returned to Paris on the last day of the recess, which chanced to fall on Sunday, and he was sitting quietly in his own drawing-room, when a servant—who had been sent by the employment bureau to take the place of one whom he had dismissed—was announced.

The new-comer was a man apparently about forty years of age, very red in the face, with thick hair and heavy red whiskers—strongly inclined to corpulence, and clad in clumsy, ill-fitting garments.

In a very sedate manner, and with a strong Norman accent, he informed the judge that during the past twenty years he had been in the employ of literary men—a physician, and a notary; that he was familiar with the duties that would be required of him in the Palais de Justice, and that he knew how to dust papers without disarranging them.

In short, the man produced such a favorable impression, that although he reserved twenty-four hours in which to make further inquiries, the judge drew from his pocket a louis, and tendered it to him as the first instalment of his wages.

But the man, with a sudden change of voice and attitude, burst into a hearty laugh, and said:

"Monsieur, do you think that May will recognize me?"

"Monsieur Lecoq!" exclaimed the astonished judge.

"The same, sir; and I have come to tell you that if you are ready to release May, all my arrangements have been completed."

CHAPTER XXXV

When a judge connected with the tribunal of the Seine wishes to examine a person incarcerated in one of the prisons, the following forms are observed:

He first sends his messenger with what is called an order of extraction, an imperative and concise formula, which we quote, in order to give some idea of the unlimited power vested in the magistrates who are intrusted with the preparation of cases for the government.

It reads thus:

"The keeper of the ——— prison will give into the custody of the bearer of this order, the prisoner known as ———, in order that he may be brought before us in our cabinet in the Palais de Justice."

No more, no less, a signature, a seal, and everybody hastens to obey.

But from the moment of receiving this order to the time that the prisoner is again consigned to the keeping of the jailer, the superintendent of the prison is relieved of all responsibility. Whatever may happen, his hands are clean.

So the journey of the prisoner from the prison to the palace is usually attended with an infinite number of precautions.

They place the prisoner in one of the lugubrious

vehicles that one sees stationed every day on the Quai de l'Horloge, or the court of the Sainte-Chapelle, locking him up carefully in one of the compartments.

This vehicle conveys him to the palace, and while he is awaiting his examination, he is immured in one of the cells of that gloomy prison, familiarly known as "la Souricière"—the mouse-trap.

On entering and leaving the carriage the prisoner is surrounded by guards.

En route he is also under the watchful eye of several guards, some of them stationed in the passage-way that divides the compartments, others on the seat with the driver.

Mounted guards always accompany the vehicle.

So the boldest malefactors realize the impossibility of escape from this moving prison-house.

The statistics show only thirty attempts at escape in a period of ten years.

Of these thirty attempts, twenty-five were ridiculous failures. Four were discovered before their authors had conceived any serious hope of success. One man alone succeeded in making his escape from the vehicle, and he had not gone fifty steps before he was captured.

He accepted, boldly, perhaps, but not blindly, the struggle that must ensue.

"But," thought Lecoq, "if he decides to incur these risks he must be reasonably sure that he will succeed in overcoming them."

Such a belief on the part of May was a grave subject of fear for the young detective; but it also gave rise to a delightful emotion. He had an ambition beyond his station; and every ambitious man is by nature a gambler.

He felt that his foeman was worthy of his steel; that they had equal chances for success.

Lecoq's plan for allowing May to escape was childish in its simplicity, as he himself confessed. It consisted in fastening the compartment in which May was placed very insecurely, on the departure of the carriage from the depot, and in forgetting him entirely when the wagon, after depositing its load of criminals at the "mouse-trap," went, as usual, to await upon the quay the hour for returning them to the prison.

It was scarcely possible that the prisoner would fail to embrace this opportunity to make his escape.

All was, therefore, prepared and arranged, in conformance with Lecoq's directions, on the day indicated —the Monday following the close of the Easter holidays.

The order of "extraction" was intrusted to an intelligent man, with the most minute instructions.

The prison-van containing the prisoner May would not arrive at the palace until noon.

And yet at nine o'clock there might have been seen hanging about the prefecture one of those old *gamins*, who make one almost believe in the fable of Venus rising from the waves, so truly do they seem born of the foam and scum of the city.

He was clad in a tattered black woollen blouse, and in large, ill-fitting trousers, fastened about his waist by a leather band. His boots betrayed a familiar acquaintance with the mud-puddles of the suburbs, his cap was shabby and dirty; but his pretentiously tied red-silk cravat must have been a gift from his sweetheart.

He had the unhealthy complexion, the hollow eyes,

the slouching mien, the straggling beard common to his tribe.

His yellow hair was plastered down upon his temples, but cut closely at the back of the head, as if to save the trouble of brushing it.

On seeing his attire, the way in which he balanced himself upon his haunches, the movement of his shoulders, his way of holding his cigarette and of ejecting a stream of saliva from between his teeth, Polyte Chupin would have extended his hand as to a friend, and greeted him as "comrade" and "pal."

It was the 14th of April; the day was lovely, the air balmy, the tops of the chestnut-trees in the garden of the Tuileries looked green against the horizon, and this man seemed well content to be alive, and happy in doing nothing.

He walked lazily to and fro on the quay, dividing his attention between the passers-by and the men who were hauling sand from the banks of the Seine.

Occasionally he crossed the street and exchanged a few words with a respectable elderly gentleman, very neatly dressed, and wearing spectacles and a very long beard, his hands encased in silk gloves. This person exhibited all the characteristics of a respectable, well-to-do gentleman, and seemed to feel a remarkable curiosity in regard to the contents of an optician's window.

From time to time a policeman or one of the detective corps passed them on his way to make his report; and the elderly gentleman or the *gamin* often ran after him to ask some information.

The person addressed replied and passed on; and then the two *confrères* joined each other to laugh and say:

"Good! there is another who does not recognize us."

And they had just cause for exultation, and good reason to be proud.

Of the twelve or fifteen comrades whom they had accosted, not one had recognized their colleagues, Lecoq and Father Absinthe.

For it was indeed they, armed and equipped for the chase, for the pursuit whose chances and result it was impossible to foresee.

"Ah! I am not surprised that they do not recognize me," said Father Absinthe, "since I cannot recognize myself. No one but you, Monsieur Lecoq, could have so transformed me."

But the time for reflection was past; the time for action had come.

The young detective saw the prison-van crossing the bridge at a brisk trot.

"Attention!" he said to his companion; "there comes our friend! Quick! to your post; remember my directions, and keep your eyes open!"

Near them, on the quay, was a huge pile of timber. Father Absinthe went and hid himself behind it; and Lecoq, seizing a spade that was lying idle, hurried to a little distance and began digging in the sand.

They did well to make haste. The van came onward and turned the corner.

It passed the two men, and with a noisy clang rolled under the heavy arch that led to "la Souricière."

May was inside.

Lecoq was sure of this when he saw the keeper, who was seated in the vehicle.

The carriage remained in the court-yard for more than a quarter of an hour.

When it reappeared in the street, the driver had descended from his seat and was leading the horses by the bridle. He stationed the carriage opposite the Palais de Justice, threw a covering over his horses, lighted his pipe, and walked away.

For a moment the anxiety of the two watchers amounted to actual agony; nothing stirred; nothing moved.

But at last the door of the carriage was opened with infinite caution, and a pale, frightened face became visible. It was the face of May.

The prisoner cast a rapid glance around; no one was in sight.

With the quickness of a cat, he sprang to the ground, noiselessly closed the door of the vehicle, and walked quietly in the direction of the bridge.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Lecoq breathed again.

He had been asking himself if some trifling circumstance could have been forgotten or neglected, and thus disarranged all his plans.

He had been wondering if this strange man would refuse the dangerous liberty which had been offered him.

Foolish disquietude! May had fled; not thoughtlessly, but premeditatedly.

From the moment when he was left alone and apparently forgotten in the insecurely locked compartment, to the instant when he opened the door, sufficient time had elapsed to give a man of his intellect and clearness of discernment ample opportunity to

analyze and calculate all the chances of so grave a step.

Hence, if he stepped into the snare that had been laid for him, it would be with a full knowledge of the risks he must be prepared to run.

They were alone together, free in the streets of Paris, armed with mutual distrust, obliged alike to resort to strategy, forced to hide from each other.

Lecoq, it is true, had an auxiliary—Father Absinthe. But who could say that May would not be aided by his redoubtable accomplice?

It was then a veritable duel, whose result depended entirely upon the courage, skill, and coolness of the antagonists.

All these thoughts flashed through the young man's brain with the quickness of lightning.

He threw down his spade, and, running to a policeman, who was just coming out of the palace, he gave him a letter which he held ready in his pocket.

"Take this to Monsieur Segmuller, at once; it is a matter of importance," said he.

The officer attempted to question this *gamin* who was in correspondence with the magistrates; but Lecoq had already darted off in the footsteps of the prisoner.

May had gone only a little distance. He was sauntering along, with his hands in his pockets, his head high in the air, his manner composed and full of assurance.

Had he reflected that it would be dangerous to run while near the prison from which he had just made his escape? Or had he decided that, since they had given him this opportunity to escape, there was no danger that they would arrest him immediately?

Nor did he quicken his pace when he had crossed the

bridge; and it was with the same tranquil manner that he had crossed the Quai aux Fleurs and turned into the Rue de la Cité.

Nothing in his bearing or appearance proclaimed him an escaped prisoner. Since his trunk—that famous trunk which he pretended to have left at the Hôtel de Mariembourg—had been returned to him, he had been well supplied with clothing; and he never failed, when summoned before the judge, to array himself in his best apparel.

He wore that day, a coat, vest, and pantaloons of black cloth. One, to see him, would have supposed him a working man of the better class, off on a holiday excursion.

But when, after crossing the Seine, he reached the Rue Sainte-Jacques, his manner changed. His tread, perfectly assured until then, became uncertain. He walked slowly, looking to the right and to the left, studying the signs.

"Evidently he is seeking something," thought Lecoq; "but what?"

It was not long before he discovered.

Seeing a shop where second-hand clothing was sold, May entered in evident haste.

Lecoq stationed himself in a *porte-cochère* on the opposite side of the street, and pretended to be busily engaged lighting a cigarette. Father Absinthe thought he could approach without danger.

"Ah, well, Monsieur; here is our man changing his fine clothing for coarser garments. He will demand money in return; and they will give it to him. You told me this morning: 'May without a sou—that is the trump card in our game!'"

"Nonsense! Before we begin to lament, let us wait

and see what will happen. It is not likely that the shopkeeper will give him the money. He will not buy clothing of every passer-by."

Father Absinthe withdrew to a little distance. He distrusted these reasons, but not Lecoq who gave them to him. In his secret soul Lecoq was cursing himself.

Another blunder; another weapon left in the hands of the enemy. How was it that he, who thought himself so shrewd, had not foreseen this?

His remorse was less poignant when he saw May emerge from the store as he had entered it.

Luck, of which he had spoken to Father Absinthe, without believing in it, had for once been in his favor.

The prisoner actually staggered when he stepped out upon the pavement. His countenance betrayed the terrible anguish of a drowning man when he sees the frail plank which was his only hope of salvation torn from his grasp.

He gave a peculiar whistle, which was the signal agreed upon to warn his companion that he abandoned the pursuit to him; and having received a similar signal in response, he entered the shop.

But what had taken place? Lecoq wished to know.

The merchant was still standing at his counter. Lecoq wasted no time in parleying. He merely showed his card to acquaint the man with his profession, and curtly demanded the desired information.

"What did the man want who just left here?"

The merchant seemed troubled.

"It is a long story," he stammered.

"Tell it!" ordered Lecoq, surprised at the man's embarrassment.

"Oh, it is very simple. About twelve years ago, a

man entered my store with a bundle under his arm. He claimed that he was a countryman of mine."

"Are you an Alsatian?"

"Yes, sir. Well, I went with this man to the wine-shop on the corner, where he ordered a bottle of the best wine; and when we had drank together, he asked me if I would consent to keep the package he had with him until one of his cousins came to claim it. To prevent any mistake, this cousin was to utter certain words —a countersign, as it were. I refused, shortly and decidedly, for the very month before I had gotten into trouble, and had been accused of receiving stolen goods, by obliging a person in this same way. Well, you never saw a man so vexed and so surprised. What made me all the more determined in my refusal was that he offered me a good round sum in payment for my trouble. This only increased my suspicions, and I persisted in my refusal."

He paused to take breath; but Lecoq was on fire with impatience.

"And what then?" he insisted.

"Afterward the man paid for the wine, and went away. I had forgotten all about the occurrence, until this man came in just now, and asked me if I had not a package for him, which had been left here by one of his cousins, whereupon he uttered some peculiar words—the countersign, doubtless. When I replied that I had nothing, he turned as white as his shirt; and I thought that he was going to faint. All my suspicions returned. So when he proposed that I should buy his clothing—no; I thank you."

All this was very plain.

"And how did this cousin look who was here a fortnight ago?" inquired the detective.

"He was a large, and rather corpulent man, with a ruddy complexion, and white whiskers. Ah! I should recognize him in an instant!"

"The accomplice!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing that would interest you. Thank you. I am in a hurry. You will see me again; good-morning."

Lecoq had not remained in the store five minutes; yet, when he emerged, May and Father Absinthe were nowhere to be seen.

But this did not occasion any uneasiness in Lecoq's mind.

When making arrangements with his old colleague for this pursuit the detective had endeavored to imagine all possible difficulties in order to solve them in advance.

The present situation had been foreseen. And it had been agreed that if one of the observers was obliged to remain behind, the other, who was closely following May, should make chalk-marks from time to time upon the walls, and upon the shutters of the shops, which would indicate the route to be followed, and enable his companion to rejoin him.

So, in order to know which way to go, Lecoq had only to examine the fronts of the buildings around him.

This task was neither long nor difficult.

Upon the shutters of the third shop above that of the second-hand clothes-dealer, a superb dash of the crayon told Lecoq to turn into the Rue Sainte-Jacques.

The detective rushed on in that direction, greatly disquieted.

His assurance of the morning had received a rude shock!

What a terrible warning that old clothes-dealer's declaration had been!

And so it was an established fact that the mysterious and redoubtable accomplice had proved his marvellous foresight by making every possible arrangement to ensure his companion's salvation, in case he was allowed to escape.

The subtle penetration of this man surpassed the pretended miracles of clairvoyants.

"What did this package contain?" thought Lecoq. "Clothing, undoubtedly; all the equipments of a complete disguise, money, clothing, papers, a forged passport."

He had reached the Rue Soufflot, and paused for an instant to ask his way from the walls.

It was the work of a second. A long chalk-mark on the shop of a watchmaker pointed to the Boulevard Saint-Michel.

The young man hastened in that direction.

"The accomplice," he continued, "did not succeed in his attempt in the case of the old clothes-dealer; but he is not the man to be disheartened by one rebuff. He has certainly taken other measures. How shall I divine them, in order to circumvent them?"

The prisoner had crossed the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and had then taken the Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Father Absinthe's dashes of the crayon declared this fact with many eloquent flourishes.

"One circumstance reassures me," the detective murmured; "May's going to this shop, and his consternation on finding that there was nothing for him there. The accomplice had informed him of his plans, but had *not* been able to inform him of the failure. Hence, from this hour, the prisoner is left upon his own resources.

The chain that bound him to his accomplice is broken; there is no longer an understanding between them. Everything depends now upon keeping them apart. That is everything!"

How much he rejoiced that he had succeeded in having May removed to another prison. His triumph, in case he did succeed, would be the result of this act of distrust. He was convinced that this attempt, on the part of the accomplice, had taken place the very evening before May was removed to another prison; and this explained why it had been impossible to warn him of the failure of one plan and to substitute another.

Still following the chalk-marks, Lecoq had reached the Odéon. Here—more signs; but he perceived Father Absinthe under the gallery. The old man was standing before the window of a book-store, apparently engrossed in the examination of the pictures in an illustrated journal.

Lecoq, assuming the nonchalant manner of the loafer whose garb he wore, took a place beside his colleague.

"Where is he?" the young man asked.

"There," replied his companion, with a slight movement of his head toward the staircase.

The fugitive was, indeed, seated upon one of the steps of the stone stairs, his elbows resting upon his knees, his face hidden in his hands, as if he felt the necessity of concealing the expression of his face from the passers-by.

Undoubtedly, at that moment, he gave himself up for lost. Alone, in the midst of Paris, without a penny, what was to become of him?

He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he was watched; that his every step was followed; and he knew only too well that the first attempt he made to inform his

accomplice of his whereabouts would cost him his secret—the secret which he held as more precious than life itself, and which, by immense sacrifices, he had thus far been able to preserve.

After contemplating in silence for some time this unfortunate man whom he could but esteem and admire, after all, Lecoq turned to his old companion.

"What did he do on the way?" he inquired.

"He went into the shops of five dealers in second-hand clothing without success. Then he addressed a man who was passing with a lot of old rubbish on his shoulder; but the man would not even answer him."

Lecoq nodded his head thoughtfully.

"The moral of this is, that there is a vast difference between theory and practice," he remarked. "Here is a man who has made the most discerning believe that he is a poor devil, a low buffoon; so much as he prated of the misfortunes and the hazards of his existence— He is free; and this so-called Bohemian does not know how to go to work to sell the clothing that he wears upon his back. The comedian who could play his part so well upon the stage, disappears; the man remains—the man who has always been rich, and who knows nothing of the vicissitudes of life."

He ceased his moralizing, for May had risen from his seat.

Lecoq was only ten paces from him, and could see him very plainly.

The wretched man's face was livid; his attitude expressed the most profound dejection; one could read his indecision in his eyes.

Perhaps he was wondering if it would not be best for him to go and place himself again in the hands of his

jailers, since the resources upon which he had depended had failed him.

But, after a little, he shook off the torpor that had overpowered him; his eye brightened, and, with a gesture of defiance, he descended the staircase, crossed the open square and entered the Rue de l'Ancienne-Comédie.

He walked on now with a brisk, determined step, like a man who has an aim in view.

"Who knows where he is going now?" murmured Father Absinthe, as he trotted along by Lecoq's side.

"I know," replied the detective. "And the proof is, that I am going to leave you, and run on in advance, to prepare for his reception. I may be mistaken, however, and as it is necessary to be prepared for any emergency, leave me the chalk-marks as you go along. If our man does not come to the Hôtel de Mariembourg, as I think he will, I shall come back here to start in pursuit of you again."

An empty *fiacre* chanced to be passing; Lecoq entered it and told the coachman to drive to the Northern Railway depot by the shortest route, and as quickly as possible.

He had little time to spare, so while he was on the way he profited by the opportunity to pay the driver and to search in his note-book, among the documents confided to him by M. Segmuller, for the particular paper that he wanted.

The carriage had scarcely stopped before Lecoq was on the ground and running toward the hotel.

As on the occasion of his first visit, he found Mme. Milner standing upon a chair before the cage of her starling, obstinately repeating her German phrase, to

which the bird with equal obstinacy responded: "Camille! where is Camille?"

In seeing the rather questionable-looking individual who invaded her hotel, the pretty widow did not deign to change her position.

"What do you want?" she demanded, in a rather discouraging tone.

"I am the nephew of a messenger in the Palais de Justice," Lecoq responded, with an awkward bow, entirely in keeping with his attire. "On going to see my uncle this morning, I found him laid up with the rheumatism; and he asked me to bring you this paper in his stead. It is a citation for you to appear at once before the judge of instruction."

This reply induced Mme. Milner to abandon her perch. She took the paper and read it. It was, indeed, as this singular messenger had said.

"Very well," she responded; "give me time to throw a shawl over my shoulder and I will obey."

Lecoq withdrew with another awkward bow; but he had not crossed the threshold before a significant grimace betrayed his inward satisfaction.

She had duped him once, now he had repaid her.

He crossed the street, and seeing on the corner of the Rue Saint-Quentin a house in process of construction, he concealed himself there, waiting.

"Time to slip on my bonnet and shawl, and I will start!"

Mme. Milner had replied thus. But she was forty years of age, a widow, a blonde, very pretty, and very agreeable still, at least in the opinion of the commissioner of police in that quarter, so she required more than ten minutes to tie the strings of her blue velvet bonnet.

At the thought that May might arrive at any moment, Lecoq felt a cold perspiration issue from the pores of his entire body.

How much was he in advance of the fugitive? A half hour, perhaps! And he had accomplished only half of his task.

The shadow of each passer-by made him shudder.

At last the coquettish mistress of the hotel made her appearance as radiant as a spring morning.

She probably wished to make up for the time spent in making her toilet, for as she turned the corner she began to run.

As soon as she was out of sight, the young detective bounded from his place of concealment, and burst into the Hôtel de Mariembourg like a bomb-shell.

Fritz, the Bavarian lad, must have been warned that the house was to be left in his sole charge for some hours, and—he was guarding it.

He was comfortably established in his mistress's own particular arm-chair, his legs resting upon another chair, and he was already sound asleep.

"Wake up!" shouted Lecoq; "wake up!"

At the sound of this voice, which rang like a trumpet-blast, Fritz sprang to his feet frightened half out of his wits.

"You see that I am an agent of the prefecture of police," said the visitor, showing his badge, "and if you wish to avoid all sorts of disagreeable things, the least of which will be a sojourn in prison, you must obey me."

The boy trembled in every limb.

"I will obey," he stammered. "But what am I to do?"

"A very little thing. A man is coming here in a moment; you will know him by his black clothes, and

by his long beard. You must reply to him word for word, as I tell you. And remember, if you make any mistake, even an involuntary one, you will suffer for it."

"You may rely upon me, sir," replied Fritz. "I have an excellent memory."

The prospect of a prison had terrified him into abject submission. He spoke the truth; one might have asked anything of him.

Lecoq profited by this disposition; and with clearness and conciseness he told the lad what he was to do.

When he had finished his explanation, he added:

"Now, I wish to see and hear. Where can I hide myself?"

Fritz pointed to a glass door.

"In the dark room there, sir. By leaving the door ajar you can hear, and you can see everything through the glass."

Without a word Lecoq darted into the room designated, for the spring-bell on the outer door announced the arrival of some visitor.

It was May.

"I desire to speak to the mistress of this hotel," he said.

"Which mistress?"

"The woman who received me when I came here six weeks ago——"

"I understand," interrupted Fritz; "it is Madame Milner whom you wish to see. You come too late; she no longer owns this house. She sold it about a month ago, and has returned to her former home, Alsace."

The man stamped his foot with a terrible oath.

"I have a claim to make upon her," he insisted.

"Do you wish me to call her successor?"

In his place of concealment, Lecoq could not help admiring Fritz, who was uttering these glaring falsehoods with that air of perfect candor which gives the Germans such an advantage over people of the south, who seem to be lying even when they are telling the truth.

"The successor will send me walking!" exclaimed May. "I came to reclaim the money I paid for a room which I have never used."

"Such money is never refunded."

The man muttered some incoherent threat, in which such words as "evident stealing" and "justice" could be distinguished; then he went out, slamming the door violently behind him.

"Well! did I answer properly?" Fritz triumphantly demanded, as Lecoq emerged from his hiding-place.

"Yes, perfectly," replied the detective.

And pushing aside the boy, who was standing in his way, he dashed after May.

A vague fear almost suffocated him.

It had struck him that the fugitive had not been either surprised or deeply affected by the news he had heard. He had come to the hotel depending upon Mme. Milner's aid; the news of the departure of this woman, who was the confidential friend of his accomplice, might reasonably be expected to terrify him.

Had he divined the ruse that had been played upon him? And how?

His good sense told him so plainly that the fugitive must have been put on his guard that Lecoq's first question, on rejoining Father Absinthe, was:

"May spoke to someone on his way to the hotel."

"Why, how could you know that?" exclaimed the worthy man, greatly astonished.

"Ah! I was sure of it! To whom did he speak?"

"To a very pretty woman, upon my word!—fair and plump as a partridge."

Lecoq turned green with anger.

"Fate is against us!" he exclaimed with an oath. "I run on in advance to Madame Milner's house, so that May shall not see her. I invent an excuse for sending her out of the hotel, and they encounter each other."

Father Absinthe gave a despairing gesture.

"Ah! if I had known!" he murmured; "but you did not tell me to prevent May from speaking to the passers-by."

"Never mind, my old friend," said Lecoq, consolingly; "it could not have been helped."

The fugitive had reached the Faubourg Montmartre, and his pursuers were obliged to hasten forward and get closer to their man, that they might not lose him in the crowd.

When they had almost overtaken him:

"Now," resumed Lecoq, "give me the details. Where did they meet?"

"On the Rue Saint-Quentin."

"Which saw the other first?"

"May."

"What did the woman say? Did you hear any cry of surprise?"

"I heard nothing, because I was quite fifty paces from them; but by the woman's manner, I could see that she was stupefied."

Ah! if Lecoq could have witnessed the scene, what valuable deductions he would have drawn from it!

"Did they talk for a long time?"

"For less than a quarter of an hour."

"Do you know whether Madame Milner gave May money, or not?"

"I cannot say. They gesticulated like mad—so violently, indeed, that I thought they were quarrelling."

They knew they were watched, and they were endeavoring to divert suspicion.

"If they would only arrest this woman and question her," suggested Father Absinthe.

"What good would it do? Has not Monsieur Segmuller examined and cross-examined her a dozen times without drawing anything from her! Ah! she is a cunning one. She would declare that May met her and insisted that she should refund the ten francs that he paid her for his room. We must do our best," he continued, with a sort of resignation. "If the accomplice has not been warned already, he will soon be told, and we must try to keep the two men apart. What ruse they will employ, I cannot divine. But I know that it will be nothing hackneyed."

Lecoq's presumptions made Father Absinthe tremble.

"The surest way, perhaps, would be to lock him up again!"

"No!" replied the detective. "I desire his secret; I will have it. What will be said of us, if we two allow this man to escape us? He will not, I think, be visible and invisible by turns, like the devil. We will see what he is going to do now that he has money and a plan—for he has both at the present moment. I would stake my right hand upon it."

At that same instant, as if the prisoner intended to convince Lecoq of the truth of his suspicions, he entered a tobacco store, and emerged, an instant afterward, with a cigar in his mouth.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The mistress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg had given May money; the purchase of this cigar proved it conclusively.

But had they agreed upon any plan? Had they had time to decide, point by point, upon the method to be employed in evading the pursuers?

It would seem so, since the conduct of the fugitive had changed in more respects than one.

Until now, he had appeared to care little for the danger of being pursued and overtaken; but after his meeting with Mme. Milner, he seemed uneasy and agitated. After walking so long in the full sunlight, with his head high in the air, he appeared to have been seized by a sort of panic; and he now slunk along in the shadow of the houses, hiding himself as much as possible.

"It is evident that the man's fears are augmented by reason of his hopes," said Lecoq to his companion. "He was totally discouraged in the Odéon; the merest trifle would have decided him to surrender himself; now he thinks he has a chance to escape with his secret."

The fugitive had followed the boulevard as far as the Place Vendôme; he crossed it, and turned toward the Temple.

Soon after, Father Absinthe and his companion saw him conversing with one of those importunate merchants who consider every passer-by their lawful prey.

The dealer set a price on an article, and May feebly demurred; but he finally yielded, and disappeared in the shop.

"He has determined on a change of costume. Is it

not always the first impulse of an escaped prisoner?" remarked Lecoq.

Soon May emerged from the store, metamorphosed from head to foot.

He was now clad in heavy dark-blue linen pantaloons, and a loosely fitting coat of rough woollen material. A gay silk 'kerchief was knotted about his throat; and upon his head was a soft cap with a visor; this he had perched rakishly over one ear.

Really, he was but little more prepossessing in his appearance than Lecoq himself. One would have hesitated before deciding which of the two men one would prefer to meet in the depths of a lonely forest.

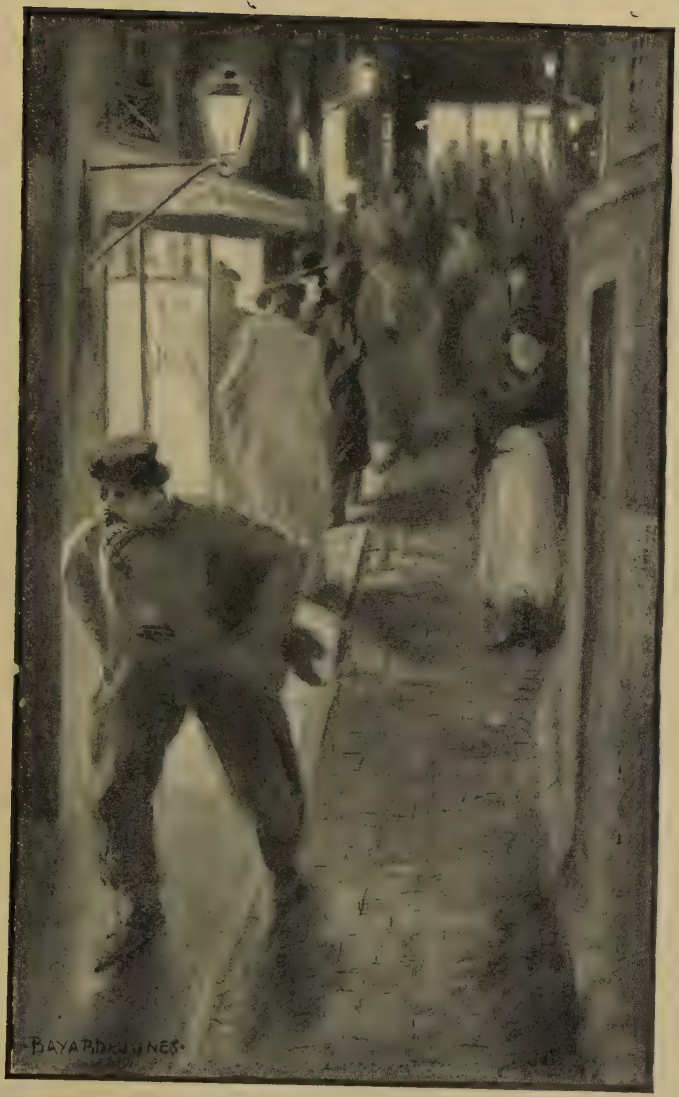
He seemed content with his transformation, and appeared more at ease in his new attire. There was evident suspicion in the glance he cast around him, as if he were endeavoring to discover which persons among the crowd were charged with watching him, and wresting his secret from him.

He had not parted with his broadcloth suit; he was carrying it under his arm, wrapped in a handkerchief. He had bought, but had not sold; he had diminished his capital, and not augmented it. He had left only his tall silk hat.

Lecoq wished to enter the store and make some inquiries; but he felt that it would be an act of imprudence on his part, for May had settled his cap upon his head with a gesture that left no doubt of his intentions.

A second after he turned into the Rue du Temple. Now the chase began in earnest; and soon the two pursuers had all they could do to follow their man, who seemed endowed with the agility of a deer.

May had probably lived in England and in Germany, since he spoke the language of these countries like a



There was evident suspicion in the glance he cast around him.

native; but one thing was certain—he knew Paris as thoroughly as the oldest Parisian.

This was demonstrated by the way in which he dashed into the Rue des Gravilliers, and the precision of his course through the multitude of winding streets that lie between the Rue du Temple and the Rue Beaubourg.

He seemed to know this quarter perfectly; as well, indeed, as if he had spent half his life there. He knew all the public houses that had two outside doors—all the by-ways and tortuous lanes.

Twice he almost escaped his pursuers; once his salvation hung upon a thread. If he had remained in an obscure corner, where he was completely hidden, only an instant longer, the two detectives would have passed him, and his safety would have been assured.

The pursuit presented immense difficulties. Night was coming on, and with it that light fog which almost invariably follows the earliest days of spring. The street-lamps glimmered luridly in the mist, without throwing their light any considerable distance.

And to add to these difficulties, the streets were now thronged with workmen who were returning home after the labors of the day, with housewives purchasing provisions for supper; and around every house its numerous occupants were swarming like bees around their hive.

May took advantage of every opportunity to mislead the persons who might be following him. Groups of people, collisions between carriages, he utilized them all with such marvellous presence of mind and such rare skill, that he often glided through the crowd without leaving any sign of his passage.

At last he left the Rue des Gravilliers and entered a

broader street. Reaching the Boulevard de Sébastopol, he turned to the left, and took a fresh start.

He darted on with marvellous rapidity, his elbows pressed closely to his body, husbanding his breath, and timing his steps with the precision of a dancing-master.

Stopping for nothing, without once turning his head, he hurried on.

And it was with the same regular but rapid pace that he went down the Boulevard de Sébastopol, that he crossed the Place du Châtelet, and again entered the Boulevard Saint-Michel.

Some *fiacres* were stationed nearby.

May addressed one of the drivers, and after a few moments' conversation entered his carriage.

The *fiacre* started off at a rapid pace.

But May was not in. He had only passed through the carriage, and just as the driver was starting on an imaginary route which had been paid for in advance, May slipped into another vehicle, which was standing beside the *fiacre* he had hired first, and the carriage left the stand at a gallop.

Perhaps, after so many ruses, after such a formidable effort, after this last stratagem—perhaps May believed that he was free. He was mistaken.

Behind the *fiacre* which bore him onward, leaning back upon the cushion to rest—a man was running. It was Lecoq.

Poor Father Absinthe had fallen by the way. Before the Palais de Justice he paused, exhausted and breathless, and Lecoq had little hope of seeing him again, since he had all he could do to keep his man in sight, without stopping to make the chalk-marks agreed upon.

May had ordered his coachman to carry him to the Place d'Italie; and had requested him to stop exactly in

the middle of the square. This was about a hundred paces from the station-house in which he had been incarcerated with the Widow Chupin.

When the carriage stopped he sprang to the ground, and cast a rapid glance around him, as if looking for some dreaded shadow.

He saw nothing. Although surprised by the sudden checking of the vehicle, the detective had yet had time to fling himself flat on his stomach under the body of the carriage, though not without danger of being crushed by the wheels.

More and more reassured, apparently May paid the coachman, and retraced his course to the Rue Mouffetard.

With a bound, Lecoq was on his feet again, and started after him, as eagerly as a ravenous dog follows a bone. He had reached the shadow cast by the large trees in the outer boulevards, when a faint whistle resounded in his ears.

"Father Absinthe!" he exclaimed, surprised and delighted.

"The same," replied that good man, "and quite rested, thanks to a good fellow who was passing in a wagon and who picked me up and brought me here——"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Lecoq. "Let us keep our eyes open."

May stopped before first one and then another of the numerous saloons in that locality. He seemed to be looking for something.

After peering through the glass doors of three of these establishments, he entered the fourth.

The glass was not glazed; and the two detectives looked through the panes with all their eyes.

They saw the prisoner cross the room and seat him-

self at a table, where a man of unusual size, ruddy-faced and gray-whiskered, was already seated.

"The accomplice!" murmured Father Absinthe.

Was this really the redoubtable accomplice?

Under other circumstances Lecoq would have hesitated to place dependence on a vague similarity in personal appearance; but here probabilities were so strongly in favor of Father Absinthe's assertion that the young detective admitted its truth at once.

Was not this meeting the logical sequence, the manifest result of the chance meeting between the fugitive and the fair-haired mistress of the Hôtel de Mariembourg!

"May," thought Lecoq, "began by taking all the money Madame Milner had about her; he afterward charged her to tell his accomplice to come and wait for him in some saloon near here. If he hesitated and looked in the different establishments, it was only because he had not been able to specify exactly which one. If they do not throw aside the mask, it will be because May is not sure that he has eluded pursuit, and because the accomplice fears that Madame Milner has been followed."

The accomplice, if it was really the accomplice, had resorted to a disguise not unlike that adopted by May and Lecoq. He wore a dirty old blue blouse, and a hideous old slouch hat, really in tatters. He had rather exaggerated his make-up, for his sinister physiognomy was noticeable, even among the depraved and ferocious faces of the other denizens of the saloon.

For it was a regular den of cut-throats and of thieves that they had chosen for their rendezvous. There were not four workmen there who were worthy of the name. All the men who were eating and drinking there, were

more or less familiar with prison life. The least to be dreaded were the loafers of the *barrières,* easily recognized by their glazed caps and their loosely knotted neckerchiefs. The majority of the company present were made up of this class.

And yet May, that man who was so strongly suspected of belonging to the highest social sphere, seemed to be perfectly at home.

He called for the regular dinner and a portion of wine, and literally devoured it, gulping down his soup, and great morsels of beef, and wiping his mouth upon the back of his sleeve.

But was he conversing with his neighbor? It was impossible to discern this through the glass obscured by smoke and steam.

"I must go in," said Lecoq, resolutely. "I must get a place near them, and listen."

"Do not think of doing it," said Father Absinthe. "What if they should recognize you!"

"They will not recognize me."

"If they do, they will kill you."

Lecoq made a careless gesture.

"I really think that they would not hesitate to rid themselves of me at any cost. But, nonsense! A detective who is afraid to risk his life is no better than a low spy. Why! you saw that Gevrol, even, did not flinch."

Perhaps the old man had wished to ascertain if his companion's courage was equal to his shrewdness and sagacity. He was satisfied on this score now.

"You, my friend, will remain here to follow them if they leave hurriedly," added Lecoq.

He had already turned the knob of the door; he pushed it open, entered, and taking a seat at a table near

that occupied by the fugitive, he demanded a chop and a dram in a hoarse, guttural voice.

The fugitive and the man in the slouch hat were talking, but like strangers who had met by chance, and not at all like friends who had met at a rendezvous.

They were speaking the jargon of their pretended rank in life, not that puerile slang we find in romances descriptive of low life, but that vulgar and obscene language which it is impossible to render, so changeable and so diverse is the signification of its words.

"What wonderful actors!" thought Lecoq; "what perfection! what method! How I should be deceived if I were not absolutely certain!"

The man in the slouch hat held the floor; and he was giving a detailed account of the different prisons in France.

He told the character of the superintendents of the principal prisons, how the discipline was much more severe in this institution than in some other, and how the food at Poissy was worth ten times as much as that at Fontevault.

Lecoq, having finished his repast, ordered a small glass of brandy, and, with his back to the wall, and eyes closed, he pretended to sleep, and—listened.

May began talking in his turn; and he narrated his story (exactly as he had related it to the judge), from the murder up to his escape, without forgetting to mention the suspicions regarding his identity—suspicions which had afforded him great amusement, he said.

Now, he would be perfectly happy if he had money enough to take him back to Germany. But he did not possess it, nor did he know how to procure it. He had not even succeeded in selling the clothing which belonged to him, and which he had with him in a bundle.

Thereupon the man in the felt hat declared that he had too good a heart to leave a comrade in such embarrassment. He knew, in the very same street, an obliging dealer in such articles, and he offered to take May there at once.

May's only response was to rise, saying, "Let us start." And they did start, with Lecoq still at their heels.

They walked rapidly on until they came to the Rue Fer-à-Moulin, then they turned into a narrow and dimly lighted alley, and entered a dingy dwelling.

"Run and ask the *concièrge* if there are not two doors by which one can leave this house," said Lecoq, addressing Father Absinthe.

The house, however, had but one entrance, and the two detectives waited.

"We are discovered!" murmured Lecoq. "I am sure of that. The fugitive must have recognized me, or the boy at the Hôtel de Mariembourg has described me to the accomplice."

Father Absinthe made no response, for the two men just then came out of the house. May was jingling some coins in his hand, and seemed to be in very ill-humor.

"What infernal rascals these receivers of stolen goods are!" he grumbled.

Though he had received only a small sum for his clothing, he probably felt that the kindness of his companion ought to be rewarded, for May proposed that they should take a drink together, and they entered a wine-shop nearby, for that purpose.

They remained there more than an hour, drinking together, and left that only to enter a saloon a hundred paces distant.

Turned out by the proprietor, who was closing his store, the friends took refuge in the next one that remained open. The owner drove them from this, and they hurried to another, then to another.

And so by drinking of bottles of wine, in very small glasses, they reached the Place Saint-Michel about one o'clock in the morning.

But there they found nothing to drink; all the saloons were closed.

The two men then held a consultation together, and, after a short discussion, they walked arm-in-arm in the direction of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, like a pair of friends.

The liquor which they had imbibed in such great quantities seemed to produce its effect. They staggered considerably as they walked; and they talked very loudly and both at the same time.

In spite of the danger, Lecoq advanced near enough to seize some fragments of their conversation; and the words "a good stroke," and "money enough to satisfy one," reached his ears.

Father Absinthe's confidence wavered.

"All this will end badly," he murmured.

"Do not be alarmed," replied his friend. "I do not understand the manœuvres of these wily confederates, I frankly confess; but what does that matter after all—now that the two men are together, I feel sure of success—sure. If one runs away, the other will remain, and Gevrol shall soon see which is right, he or I."

Meanwhile the pace of the two drunken men had slackened a trifle.

By the air with which they examined the magnificent residences of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, one would have suspected them of the worst intentions.

On the Rue de Varennes, only a few steps from the Rue de la Chaise, they paused before the low wall that surrounded an immense garden.

The man in the slouch hat now did the talking. He was explaining to May—they could tell by his gestures—that the mansion to which this garden belonged fronted upon the Rue de Grenelle.

"Bah!" growled Lecoq, "how much farther will they carry this nonsense?"

They carried it to assaulting the place.

By the aid of his companion's shoulders, May raised himself to a level with the wall, and an instant after they heard the sound of his fall in the garden.

The man in the slouch hat remained in the street to watch.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The enigmatical fugitive had accomplished his strange, his inconceivable design so quickly that Lecoq had neither the time nor the desire to oppose him.

His amazement at this unexpected misfortune was so great that for ten seconds it deprived him of the power of thought and of motion.

But he quickly regained his self-possession, and he decided upon his course with that rapidity of decision which is the good genius of men of action.

With a sure eye he measured the distance that separated him from May's accomplice, and with three bounds he was upon him.

The man tried to cry out; an iron hand stifled the cry in his throat. He tried to escape, and to beat off his assailant, but a vigorous kick flung him to the ground like an infant.

Before he had time to think of further resistance he was bound, gagged, lifted, and carried, half suffocated, around the corner of the Rue de la Chaise.

Not a word, not an exclamation, not an oath, not even a sound of scuffling—nothing.

Any suspicious noise might have reached May, on the other side of the wall, and given him warning.

"How strange!" murmured Father Absinthe, too much amazed to lend a helping hand to his younger colleague. "How strange! Who would have supposed——"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Lecoq, in that harsh, imperious voice which imminent peril always gives to energetic men. "Enough! we will talk to-morrow. I must run away for an instant, and you will remain here. If May shows himself, capture him; do not allow him to escape."

"I understand; but what is to be done with the man who is lying there?"

"Let him be where he is. I have bound him securely, so there is nothing to fear from him. When the night police pass, we will give him into charge——"

He paused and listened. Not far off, they heard heavy and measured footsteps approaching.

"There they are now," said Father Absinthe.

"Ah! I dared not hope it! I shall have a good chance now."

He had the opportunity he longed for, two policemen, whose attention had been attracted by the group they saw on the corner of the street, hastened toward him.

In a few words, Lecoq explained the situation. It was decided that one of the policemen should take the accom-

plice to the station-house, and that the other should remain with Father Absinthe to cut off May's retreat.

"And now," said Lecoq, "I will run round to the Rue de Grenelle and give the alarm. To whose house does this garden belong?"

"What!" replied one of the policemen, in surprise, "do you not know the gardens of the Duc de Sairmeuse, the famous duke who is a millionnaire ten times over, and who was formally the friend——"

"I know, I know!" said Lecoq.

"The thief must have fallen into a trap if he put his nose in there. They had a reception at the mansion this evening, as they do every Monday, and everybody in the house is up. The guests have scarcely departed. There were five or six carriages still at the door as we passed."

Lecoq darted away, more troubled by what he had just heard than he had been before.

He understood now, that if May had entered this house, it was not for the purpose of committing a robbery, but in the hope of throwing his pursuers off the track, and making his escape through the Rue de Grenelle, which he might easily have done unnoticed, in the bustle and confusion attending the departure of the guests.

This last thought occurred to him on reaching the Hôtel de Sairmeuse, a princely dwelling, whose immense façade was brilliantly illuminated.

The carriage of the last guest was just issuing from the court-yard, several footmen were extinguishing the lights, and the Swiss, a tall and imposing man, dazzling to behold in his gorgeous livery, was just closing the heavy, double doors of the grand entrance.

The detective advanced toward this important personage.

"Is this the Hôtel de Sairmeuse?" he inquired.

The Swiss suspended his labors to survery this audacious vagabond who ventured to question him, then in a harsh voice:

"I advise you to pass on. I want none of your jesting."

Lecoq had forgotten that he was clad in the garb affected by Polyte Chupin.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "I am not what I seem to be. I am an agent of the secret service, Monsieur Lecoq. Here is my card, if you will take my word for it; and I came to tell you that an escaped criminal has just scaled the garden-wall of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse."

"A crim-in-al?"

The detective thought a little exaggeration would do no harm, and perhaps insure him more ready aid.

"Yes," he replied; "and one of the most dangerous kind—an assassin who has the blood of three victims already on his hands. We have just arrested his accomplice, who helped him over the wall."

The ruby nose of the Swiss paled perceptibly.

"I will summon the servants," he faltered.

And, suiting the action to the word, he raised his hand to the bell-rope, which was used to announce the arrival of visitors; but Lecoq stopped him.

"A word first!" said he. "Might not the fugitive have passed through the house, and escaped by this door, without being seen? In that case he would be far away by this time."

"Impossible!"

"But why?"

"Excuse me; I know what I am saying. First, the door opening into the garden is closed; it is open only during grand receptions, not for our informal Monday

receptions. Secondly, Monseigneur requires me to stand upon the threshold of the door when he is receiving. To-day he repeated this order, and you may be sure that I have not disobeyed him."

"Since this is the case," said Lecoq, slightly reassured, "we shall perhaps succeed in finding our man. Warn the servants, but without ringing the bell. The less noise we make, the greater will be our chance of success."

In a moment the fifty valets who peopled the antechambers, the stables, and the kitchens of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse were gathered together.

The great lanterns in the coach-houses and stables were lighted, and the entire garden was illuminated as by enchantment.

"If May is concealed here," thought Lecoq, delighted to see so many auxiliaries, "it is impossible for him to escape."

But it was in vain that the gardens were thoroughly explored again and again; no one was to be found.

The houses where the gardening tools were kept, the green-houses, the summer-houses, the two rustic pavilions at the foot of the garden, even the dog-kennels, were scrupulously visited—in vain.

The trees, with the exception of the horse-chestnut, at the foot of the garden, were almost destitute of leaves, but they were not neglected on that account. An agile boy, armed with a lantern, climbed each tree, and explored even the topmost branches.

"The assassin must have gone out where he came in," obstinately repeated the Swiss, who had armed himself with a huge pistol, and who would not let go his hold on Lecoq, fearing an accident, perhaps.

To convince him of his error, it was necessary for

Lecoq to place himself in communication with Father Absinthe and the two policemen on the other side of the wall, for the man who had taken the accomplice to the station-house had performed his duty and returned.

They responded by swearing that they had not taken their eyes off the wall, and that not so much as a mouse had crossed it.

Until now, their explorations had been made in rather a hap-hazard manner, each person obeying his own inspiration; but they now recognized the necessity of a methodically conducted search.

Lecoq took such measures that not a corner, not a recess, should escape scrutiny. He was dividing the task between his willing assistants, when a new-comer appeared upon the scene.

It was a grave, smooth-faced gentleman, in the attire of a notary.

"Monsieur Otto, Monseigneur's first *valet de chambre*," the Swiss murmured in Lecoq's ear.

This important personage came on the part of M. le Duc (*he* did not say "monseigneur"), to inquire the meaning of all this uproar.

When he had received an explanation, M. Otto condescended to compliment Lecoq on his efficiency, and to recommend that the hotel should be searched from garret to cellar. These precautions alone would allay the fears of Mme. la Duchesse.

He then departed; and the search began again with renewed ardor.

A mouse concealed in the gardens of the Hôtel de Sairmeuse could not have escaped discovery, so minute were the investigations.

Not an object of any size was left undisturbed. The

trees were examined leaf by leaf one might almost say.

Occasionally the discouraged servants proposed to abandon the search; but Lecoq urged them on. He ran from one to the other, entreating and threatening by turns, swearing that he asked only one more effort, and that this effort would assuredly be crowned with success.

Vain promises! The fugitive could not be found.

The evidence now was conclusive. To persist in the search longer would be worse than folly. The young detective decided to recall his auxiliaries.

"That is enough," he said, in a despondent voice. "It is now certain that the murderer is no longer in the garden."

Was he cowering in some corner of the immense house, white with fear, and trembling at the noise made by his pursuers?

One might reasonably suppose this to be the case; and such was the opinion of all the servants. Above all, such was the opinion of the Swiss, who renewed with growing assurance his affirmations of a few moments before.

"I have not moved from the threshold of my door; and I should certainly have seen any person who passed out."

"Let us go to the house, then," said Lecoq. "But first let me ask my companion, who is waiting for me in the street, to join me. It is unnecessary for him to remain there any longer."

Father Absinthe responded to the summons. All the lower doors were carefully closed and guarded, and the search through the Hôtel de Sairmeuse, one

of the largest and most magnificent residences in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, began.

But all the marvels of the universe could not have won a single glance or a second's attention from Lecoq. All his mind—all his thoughts—were engrossed by the prisoner.

It is certain that he traversed the superb drawing-rooms, an unrivalled picture-gallery, a magnificent dining-room, with sideboards groaning beneath their load of massive plate, without seeing a single object.

He went on, hurrying forward the servants who were guiding and lighting him. He lifted heavy articles of furniture as easily as he would have lifted a feather; he moved the chairs and sofas; he explored cupboards and wardrobes, examined hangings, curtains, and *portières*.

No search could have been more complete. From the court-yard to the garret not a nook was left unexplored; not a corner was forgotten.

After two hours of continuous work Lecoq returned to the first floor. Only five or six servants had accompanied him on his tour of inspection. The others had dropped off one by one, wearying of this adventure, which had at first possessed the attractions of a pleasure-party.

"You have seen everything, gentlemen," declared an old footman.

"Everything!" interrupted the Swiss; "everything! Certainly not. There are the apartments of Monseigneur and those of Madame la Duchesse still to be explored."

"Alas!" murmured Lecoq; "what good would it do?"

But the Swiss had already gone to rap gently at one

or the doors opening into the hall. His interest equalled that of the detectives. They had seen the murderer enter; he had not seen him go out; therefore the man was in the hotel, and he wished him to be found; he desired it intensely.

The door opened, and the grave and clean-shaven face of Otto, the first *valet de chambre*, showed itself.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded, in surly tones.

"To enter Monseigneur's room," replied the Swiss, "in order to see if the fugitive has not taken refuge there."

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed the head *valet de chambre*. "Where could they have entered here, and how? Besides, I cannot suffer Monsieur le Duc to be disturbed. He has been at work all night, and he is just going to take a bath to rest himself before going to bed."

The Swiss seemed much vexed at this rebuff; and Lecoq was presenting his excuses, when a voice was heard, saying:

"Let these worthy men do their duty, Otto."

"Ah! do you hear that!" exclaimed the Swiss, triumphantly.

"Very well, since Monsieur le Duc permits. That being the case, come in, I will light you through the apartments."

Lecoq entered, but it was only for form's sake that he walked through the different rooms; a library, an admirable writing-room, a charming smoking-room.

As he was passing through the bedroom he had the honor of seeing M. le Duc de Sairmeuse through the half-open door of a small, white, marble bath-room.

"Ah, well!" cried the duke, affably, "is the fugitive still invisible?"

"Still invisible, Monsieur," Lecoq replied respectfully.

The *valet de chambre* did not share his master's good-humor.

"I think, gentlemen," said he, "that you may spare yourselves the trouble of visiting the apartments of Madame la Duchesse. It is a duty which we have taken upon ourselves—the women and I—and we have looked even in the bureau-drawers.

Upon the landing the old footman, who had not ventured to enter his master's apartments, was awaiting the detectives.

He had doubtless received his orders, for he politely inquired if they desired anything, and if, after such a fatiguing night, they would not find some cold meat and a glass of wine acceptable.

Father Absinthe's eyes sparkled. He probably thought that in this *quasi* royal abode they must have delicious things to eat and drink—such viands, indeed, as he had never tasted in his life.

But Lecoq brusquely refused, and left the Hôtel de Sairmeuse, reluctantly followed by his old companion.

The poor, disappointed young man was eager to be alone. For several hours he had been obliged to exert himself to the uttermost to conceal his rage and his despair.

May escaped! vanished! evaporated! The thought drove him almost mad.

What he had declared impossible had occurred.

In his confidence and pride, he had declared that he would answer for the head of the prisoner with his own

life; and the prisoner had escaped him—had slipped from between his fingers!

When he was once more in the street, he paused before Father Absinthe, and, crossing his arms, demanded:

"Well! my old friend, what do you think of all this?"

That good man shook his head, and in a serene unconsciousness of his want of tact, responded:

"I think that Gevrol will chuckle with delight."

At the name of this, his most cruel enemy, Lecoq bounded from the ground like a wounded bull.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Gevrol has not won the battle yet. We have lost May; it is a great misfortune; but his accomplice remains in our hands. We hold this crafty man who has until now defeated all our carefully arranged plans. He is certainly shrewd and devoted to his friend; but we will see if his devotion will withstand the prospect of hard labor in the penitentiary. And that is what awaits him, if he is silent, and if he thus accepts the responsibility of aiding and abetting the prisoner's escape. Oh! I have no fears—Monsieur Segmuller will know how to draw the truth out of him."

He brandished his clinched fist with a threatening air; then, in calmer tones, he added:

"But let us go to the station-house where he was carried. I wish to question him a little."

CHAPTER XXXIX

It was not daylight, and nearly six o'clock; and when Father Absinthe and his companion reached the station-house, they found the superintendent seated at a small table, making out his report.

He did not move when they entered, failing to recognize them under their disguise.

But when they mentioned their names, the chief rose with evident *empressment*, and extended his hand.

"Upon my word!" said he, "I congratulate you on your capture last night."

Father Absinthe and Lecoq exchanged an anxious look.

"What capture?" they both asked in a breath.

"The individual whom you sent me last night so carefully bound."

"Well?"

The superintendent burst into a hearty laugh.

"So you are ignorant of your good fortune. Ah! luck has favored you, and you will receive a very handsome reward."

"Pray tell us what we have captured?" demanded Father Absinthe, impatiently.

"A scoundrel of the deepest dye, an escaped convict, who has been missing for three months. You must have a description of him in your pocket—Joseph Couturier, in short."

On hearing these words, Lecoq became so frightfully pale that Father Absinthe, believing him to be about to fall, extended his arms.

Someone hastened to bring a chair, and he seated himself.

"Joseph Couturier," he faltered, evidently unconscious of what he was saying. "Joseph Couturier! an escaped convict!"

The superintendent certainly did not understand Lecoq's agitation, any better than he understood Father Absinthe's discomfited air.

"You have reason to be proud of your work; your success will make a sensation this morning. You have captured a famous prize. I can see Gevrol's nose now, when he hears the news. Only yesterday he was boasting that he alone was capable of securing this dangerous rascal."

What irony could be more bitter than these compliments, after such an irreparable failure. They fell crushingly upon Lecoq, like so many blows of a hammer, wounding him so cruelly that he rose, and summoning all his energy, he said:

"You must be mistaken. This man is not Couturier."

"I am not mistaken; you may be assured of that. In every respect he answers the description appended to the circular ordering his capture. Even the little finger of his left hand is lacking, as mentioned in the order."

"Ah! that is a proof indeed!" groaned Father Absinthe.

"It is, indeed. And I know another even more conclusive. Couturier is an old acquaintance of mine. I have had him in custody before; and he recognized *me* last night as I recognized him."

After this, further argument was impossible; so it was in an entirely different tone that Lecoq remarked:

"At least, my friend, you will allow me to address a few questions to your prisoner."

"Oh! as many as you like. But first, let us bar the door and place two of my men before it. This Couturier has a fondness for the open air, and he would not hesitate to dash out our brains if he saw a chance of escape."

After taking these precautions, the man was removed from the cage in which he had been confined.

He advanced smilingly, having already recovered that nonchalant manner common to old offenders who, when they are once in custody, seem to lose all feeling of anger against the police; like gamblers who, having lost all, shake hands with their adversary.

He at once recognized Lecoq.

"Ah! it is you who did the business for me last night. You can boast of having a solid fist! You fell upon me very unexpectedly; and the back of my neck is still the worse for your caresses."

"Then, if I were to ask a favor of you, you would not be disposed to grant it?"

"Oh, yes! all the same. I have no more malice in my composition than a chicken; and I rather like your face. What do you wish?"

"I should like some information concerning your companion of last evening."

The man's face darkened.

"I really am unable to give it to you," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because I do not know him. I never saw him until last evening."

"It is hard to believe that. One does not take the first-comer for an expedition like yours last evening. Before undertaking such a job with a man, one finds out something about him."

"I do not say that I have not been guilty of a stupid

blunder. I could murder myself for it. There was nothing about the man to make me suspect that he was one of the secret service. He spread a net for me, and I jumped into it. It was made for me, of course; but it was not necessary for me to put my foot into it."

"You are mistaken, my man," said Lecoq. "The individual did not belong to the police force. I pledge you my word of honor, he did not."

For a moment Couturier surveyed Lecoq with a knowing air, as if he hoped to discover whether he were speaking the truth or attempting to deceive him.

"I believe you," he said, at last. "To prove it I will tell you how it all happened. I was dining alone last evening in a restaurant on the Rue Mouffetard, when that man came in and took a seat beside me. Naturally we began to talk; and I thought him a very good sort of a fellow. Apropos of, I know not what, he mentioned the fact that he had some clothing which he desired to sell; and I, glad to oblige him, took him to the house of a friend, who purchased them from him.

"It was doing him a service, was it not? Well, he offered me something to drink, and I returned the compliment, so that by midnight I began to see double.

"He chose his time to propose a plan, which would, he swore, enrich us both. It was to steal all the silver from a superb mansion.

"There would be no risk for me; he would take charge of the whole affair. I had only to help him over the wall, and keep watch.

"It was tempting—was it not? You would have thought so, had you been in my place. Still I hesitated.

"But the man insisted. He swore that he was acquainted with the habits of the house. That Monday

evening was a grand gala night there, and that on these evenings the servants did not lock up the plate. After a little I consented."

A fleeting color tinged Lecoq's pale cheeks.

Are you sure that the man told you that the Duc de Sairmeuse received every Monday evening?" he asked, eagerly.

"Certainly; how else could I have known it! He even mentioned the name you uttered just now, a name ending in —euse."

A strange, absolutely admissible thought had just flitted through Lecoq's mind.

"What if it were he?" he said to himself. "What if May and the Duc de Sairmeuse should be one and the same person?"

But he dismissed this idea, and despised himself for entertaining it, even for a moment.

He cursed his inclination to look upon the romantic and impossible side of events. Why was it surprising that a man of the world, such as he supposed May to be, should know the day chosen by the Duc de Sairmeuse to receive his friends?

He had nothing more to expect from Couturier. He thanked him, and after shaking hands with the superintendent, he departed, leaning on Father Absinthe's arm.

For he really had need of a support. His limbs trembled beneath the weight of his body; his head whirled, and he felt sick both in body and in mind.

He had failed miserably, disgracefully. He had flattered himself that he possessed a genius for his calling, and how easy it had been to outwit him.

May, to rid himself of him, Lecoq, had only been obliged to throw him a pretended accomplice, picked

up by chance in a bar-room, as a hunter, who finds himself too hard pressed by a bear, throws him his glove.

And, like a stupid beast, he had been deceived by this commonplace stratagem.

Father Absinthe was rendered uneasy by his colleague's evident dejection.

"Where are we going?" he inquired; "to the Palais de Justice, or to the prefecture?"

Lecoq shuddered on hearing this question, which brought him face to face with the horrible reality of his situation.

"To the prefecture!" he responded. "Why should I go there? To expose myself to Gevrol's insults, perhaps! I have not courage enough for that. Nor do I feel that I have strength to go to Monsieur Segmuller and say: 'Forgive me; you have judged me too favorably. I am a fool.'"

"What are we to do?"

"Ah! I do not know. Perhaps I shall embark for America—perhaps I will throw myself into the river."

He had proceeded about one hundred feet, when he stopped short.

"No!" he exclaimed, with a furious stamp of the foot. "No, this affair shall not end where it is. I have sworn that I will have the solution of this enigma —and I will have it!"

For a moment he reflected; then, in a calmer voice, he added:

"There is one man who can save us, a man who will see what I have not been able to see, who will understand what I could not understand. Let us go and ask counsel of him; my course will depend upon his response—come!"

CHAPTER XL

After a day and a night like those through which they had just passed, one would have supposed that these two men must have felt an irresistible desire to sleep.

But Lecoq was upheld by wounded vanity, intense disappointment, and a hope of revenge which was not yet extinguished.

As for Father Absinthe, he was not unlike those poor horses attached to a hackney coach, and which, having forgotten that there is such a thing as repose, are no longer conscious of fatigue, and travel on until they fall dead.

He felt that his limbs were failing him; but Lecoq said: "It is necessary," and so he walked on.

They went to Lecoq's humble lodgings, where they laid aside their disguise, and, after breakfast, started again.

It was to the Rue Saint-Lazare, a few steps from the prison, that the two men repaired. They entered one of the handsomest houses on the street, and inquired of the *concièrge:*

"Where is Monsieur Tabaret?"

"Ah! he is sick."

"Very sick?" inquired Lecoq, anxiously.

"It is hard to tell," replied the man; "it is his old trouble—gout."

And with an air of hypocritical commiseration, he added:

"Monsieur is not wise to lead the life he does. Women are all very well, but at his age——"

The two detectives exchanged a meaning glance, and as soon as their backs were turned they began to laugh.

They were still laughing when they rang the bell on the next floor.

The buxom-looking woman who came to open the door informed them that her master would receive them, although he was confined to his bed.

"But the doctor is with him now," she added. "Will the gentlemen wait until he has gone?"

The gentlemen replying in the affirmative, she conducted them into a handsome library, and invited them to take a seat.

This man whom Lecoq had come to consult was celebrated for his wonderful shrewdness, and his penetration exceeded the bounds of possibility.

He was an old employee of the Mont-de-Piété, where he held a position for forty-five years, just managing to exist upon the meagre stipend he received.

Enriched suddenly by an unexpected bequest, he at once asked for a dismissal, and the next day he began to long for this very employment that he had so often anathematized.

He endeavored to divert his mind; he began to make a collection of old books; he piled up huge mountains of tattered and worm-eaten volumes in immense oaken chests. Vain attempts! He could not shake off his *ennui*.

He grew thin and yellow; his income of forty thousand francs was killing him, when a sudden inspiration came to his relief.

It came to him one evening after reading the memoirs of a celebrated detective, one of those men of

subtle perception, soft as silk, supple as steel, whom justice sometimes sets upon the track of crime.

"And I also am a detective!" he exclaimed.

It was necessary for him to prove it.

With a feverish interest, which dated from that day, he perused every book he could find that had any connection with such subjects. Letters, memoirs, reports, pamphlets—everything.

He was pursuing his education. If a crime was committed he started out in quest of all the details, and worked up the case by himself.

But these platonic investigations did not suffice long.

One evening, at dusk, he summoned all his resolution, and going on foot to the prefecture, humbly begged employment from the officials there.

He was not very favorably received; applicants are numerous. But he pleaded his cause so adroitly that he was charged with some trifling commissions. He performed them admirably. The difficult step had been taken.

He was intrusted with others; and he displayed a wonderful aptitude for his chosen work.

The affairs of Mme. B——, the rich banker's wife, made him famous.

Consulted at a moment when the police had abandoned all hope of solving the mystery, he proved by A plus B, by a mathematical deduction, so to speak, that the dear lady must have stolen from herself.

He had told the truth.

After that he was always called upon for counsel in obscure and difficult cases.

It would be difficult to tell the *status* he held at the prefecture. When a person is employed, salary, com-

pensation of some kind is understood; but this strange man had never consented to receive a penny.

What he did he did for his own pleasure—for the gratification of a passion which had become his very life—for glory, for fame.

When the funds allowed him seemed to him insufficient, he plunged his hands into his own pockets; and the men who were working with him never left him without carrying with them substantial tokens of his munificence.

Of course, such a man had many enemies.

For no compensation, he worked as much and far better than two inspectors of police. In calling him "spoil-trade," they were not far from right.

The sound of his name alone almost threw Gevrol into convulsions. And still the jealous inspector was always alluding to an error of which this remarkable man had been guilty.

Inclined to obstinacy, like all enthusiastic men, Father Tabaret had once effected the conviction of an innocent man—a poor little tailor, who was accused of killing his wife.

This had the effect of cooling his ardor very perceptibly; and afterward he seldom visited the prefecture.

But in spite of that, he remained the oracle, like those great lawyers who, having become disgusted with practice at the bar, still win great and glorious triumphs in their quiet studies, and lend to others the weapons which they no longer desire to wield themselves.

When the authorities were undecided what course to pursue, they said: "Let us go and consult Tirauclair."

For this was the name by which he was known—a sobriquet derived from a phrase:

"Il faut que cela se tire au clair," which was ever upon his lips.

Perhaps this sobriquet aided him in the concealment of his occupation, which none of his personal friends had ever suspected.

His disturbed life when he was working up a case, the strange visitors he received, his frequent and prolonged absence from home, were imputed to a very unseasonable inclination to gallantry on his part.

His *concièrge* was deceived as well as his friends.

They laughed at his supposed infatuation; they called him an old libertine.

But people never once suspected that Tirauclair and Tabaret were one and the same person.

Lecoq was trying to gain hope and courage by reflecting upon the history of this eccentric man, when the housekeeper reappeared, announcing the departure of the physician.

At the same time she opened a door and said:

"This is Monsieur's room; these gentlemen can enter now."

CHAPTER XLI

On a large canopied bed, sweating and panting beneath his covers, lay the two-faced oracle, Tirauclair, of the prefecture—Tabaret, of the Rue Saint-Lazare.

It was impossible to believe that the owner of this face, in which stupidity seemed always disputing with perpetual astonishment, could possess superior talent, or even an average amount of intelligence.

With his retreating forehead, and his immense ears,

his odiously *retroussé* nose, his tiny eyes and coarse, thick lips, M. Tabaret presented an excellent picture of an ignorant and stupid petty-proprietor.

When he went into the streets the impudent *gamins* shouted after him; but his ugliness did not trouble him in the least, and he seemed to take pleasure in increasing his appearance of stupidity, delighting himself with the reflection that "he is not really a genius who seems to be one."

At the sight of the two detectives, whom he knew very well, the eyes of the sick man sparkled.

"Good-morning, Lecoq, my boy," said he. "Good-morning, my old Absinthe. So you think enough of poor Papa Tirauclair down there to come and see him?"

"We need your counsel, Monsieur Tabaret."

"Ah, ha!"

"We have just been as completely outwitted as if we were two children."

"What! was your man so very cunning?"

Lecoq heaved a mighty sigh.

"So cunning," he replied, "that, if I were superstitious, I should say he was the very devil himself."

The face of the sick man wore a comical expression of envy.

"What! you have found a treasure like that, and you complain! Why, it is a magnificent opportunity—a chance to be proud of! You see, my boys, everything has degenerated in these days. The race of great criminals is dying out—only their counterfeit remains—a crowd of low offenders who are not worth the shoe-leather expended in pursuing them. It is enough to disgust a detective, upon my word. No more trouble, emotion, anxiety, and excitement.

Now, when a crime is committed, the criminal is in jail the next day. One might take the omnibus and go to the culprit's house and arrest him. One always finds him—the more is the pity. But what has your man been doing?"

"He has killed three men."

"Oh! oh! oh!" said Father Tabaret, in three different tones.

This criminal was evidently superior to others of his species.

"And where did it happen?"

"In a saloon, near the *barrière*."

"Oh! yes, I recollect; a man named May. The murders were committed in the Widow Chupin's cabin. I saw it mentioned in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, and Fanferlot l'Ecureuil, who comes to see me, told me that you were strangely puzzled about the prisoner's identity. So you are charged with investigating the affair? So much the better. Tell me all about it, and I will aid you with all my little power."

He suddenly checked himself, and lowering his voice, said:

"But first do me the favor to rise; wait—when I shall make a sign to you, open that door there, on the left, very suddenly. Mariette, my housekeeper, who is curiosity itself, is there listening. I hear her hair rubbing against the lock—go!"

The young detective obeyed, and Mariette, caught in the act, hastened away, pursued by her master's sarcasms.

"You might have known that you could not succeed at that!" he shouted after her.

Though they were much nearer the door than Papa Tirauclair, neither Lecoq nor Father Absinthe had

heard the slightest sound; and they looked at each other, wondering whether their host had been playing a little farce for their benefit, or whether his sense of hearing really possessed the marvellous acuteness which this incident would indicate.

"Now," said Tabaret, settling himself more comfortably upon his pillows—"now I will listen to you, my boy. Mariette will not come back again."

On his way to Father Tabaret's, Lecoq had busied himself in preparing his story; and it was in the clearest possible manner that he related all the details, all the incidents connected with this strange affair, from the moment in which Gevrol had forced open the door of the Poivrière, to the instant when May had leaped over the garden-wall at the Hôtel de Sairmeuse.

While Lecoq was telling his story, Father Tabaret was transformed.

His gout was entirely forgotten.

According to the different phases of the recital, he turned and twisted upon his bed, uttered little cries of delight or disappointment, or lay motionless, plunged in a sort of ecstatic beatitude, like an enthusiast in classical music, listening to some divine melody of the great Beethoven.

"If I had been there! If only I had been there!" he murmured now and then through his set teeth.

When Lecoq's story was ended, his host gave vent to his enthusiasm.

"It is beautiful! it is grand!" he exclaimed. "And with just that one sentence: 'It is the Prussians who are coming,' for a starting-point! Lecoq, my boy, I must say that you have conducted this affair like an angel!"

"Do you not mean to say like a fool?" demanded the discouraged detective.

"No, my friend, certainly not. You have rejoiced my old heart. I can die; I shall have a successor. I would like to embrace you in the name of logic. Ah! that Gevrol who betrayed you—for he did betray you, there is no doubt about it—that obtuse and obstinate general is not worthy to unloose the latchets of your shoes!"

"You overpower me, Monsieur Tabaret!" interrupted Lecoq, who was not yet wholly convinced that his host was not mocking him; "but, nevertheless, May has disappeared, and I have lost my reputation, before I had begun to make it."

"Do not be in such a hurry to reject my compliments," responded Father Tabaret, with a horrible grimace. "I say that you have conducted this investigation very well; but it could have been done much better, very much better. You have a talent for this work, that is evident; but you lack experience; you become elated by a trifling advantage, or you are discouraged by a mere nothing; you fail, and yet you persist in holding fast to a fixed idea, as a moth flutters about a candle. Then, you are young. But never mind that, it is a fault you will outgrow only too soon. And now, to speak frankly, I must tell you that you have made a great many blunders."

Lecoq hung his head like a school-boy receiving a reprimand from his teacher. Was he not a scholar, and was not this old man his master?

"I will now enumerate your mistakes," continued Papa Tabaret, "and I will show you where you, on at least three occasions, have allowed an opportunity for solving this mystery to escape you."

"But, Monsieur——"

"Chut! chut! my boy, let me talk a while now. With what axiom did you start? With this: 'Always distrust appearances; believe precisely the contrary of what appears true, or even probable.'"

"Yes, that is exactly what I said to myself."

"And it was a very wise conclusion. With that idea in your lantern to illumine your path, you ought to have gone straight to the truth. But you are young, as I said before; and the very first circumstance you find that seems at all probable, you forget entirely the rule that should govern your conduct. As soon as you meet a fact that seems *more* than probable, you swallow it as eagerly as a gudgeon swallows the bait."

This comparison could but pique the young detective.

"I have not been, it seems to me, as simple as that," he protested.

"Bah! What did you think, then, when you were told that Monsieur d'Escorval had broken his leg, in alighting from his carriage?"

"Believe! I believed what they told me, because——"

He paused, and Papa Tirauclair burst into a hearty fit of laughing.

"You believed it," he said, "because it was a very plausible story."

"What would you have believed had you been in my place?"

"Exactly the opposite of what they told me. I might have been mistaken; but it would be the logical conclusion of the course of reasoning I adopted at first."

This conclusion was so bold that Lecoq was disconcerted.

"What!" he exclaimed; "do you suppose that Monsieur d'Escorval's fall is only a fiction? that he has not broken his leg?"

Papa Tabaret's face suddenly assumed a serious expression.

"I do not *suppose* it," he replied; "I am sure of it."

CHAPTER XLII

Lecoq's confidence in the oracle he was consulting was very great; but even Papa Tirauclair might be mistaken, and what he had just said seemed to be such an enormity, so completely beyond the bounds of possibility, that the young man could not hide a gesture of incredulity.

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are ready to affirm that Monsieur d'Escorval is in as good health as Father Absinthe or myself; and that he has confined himself to his room for two months to give a semblance of truth to a falsehood?"

"I would be willing to swear it."

"But what could possibly have been his object?"

Tabaret lifted his hands to heaven, as if imploring forgiveness for the young man's stupidity.

"And it was in you—in you that *I* saw a successor, and a continuator of my method of induction; and now, you ask me such a question as that! Reflect a moment. Must I give you an example to aid you? Very well. Suppose yourself a judge. A crime is committed; you are charged with the duty of investigating it, and you visit the prisoner to question him.

Very well. This prisoner has, up to that time, succeeded in concealing his identity—this was the truth in the present case, was it not? Very well. What would you do, if, at the very first glance, you recognize, under the disguise of the prisoner, your best friend, or your bitterest enemy? What would you do, I say?"

"I should say to myself that a magistrate who is obliged to hesitate between his duty and his inclinations, is placed in a very trying position, and I should endeavor to avoid it."

"I understand that; but would you reveal the true personality of this prisoner (your friend, or your enemy, as the case may be), if you alone knew it?"

It was such a delicate question; the answer was so difficult that Lecoq was silent, reflecting.

"I would reveal nothing whatever!" exclaimed Father Absinthe. "I would remain absolutely neutral. I should tell myself that others were trying to discover his identity; and they might do it if they could—but my conscience should be clear."

It was the cry of honesty; not the counsel of a casuist.

"I should also be silent," replied Lecoq, at last; "and it seems to me that, in keeping silence, I should not fail in the obligation of a magistrate."

Papa Tabaret rubbed his hands vigorously, as he always did when he was about to present some overwhelming argument.

"Such being the case," said he, "do me the favor to tell me what pretext you would invent in order to withdraw from the case without arousing suspicion?"

"I do not know; I cannot say now. But if I were

placed in such a position I should find some excuse—invent something——"

"And if you could find nothing better," interrupted Tabaret, "you would adopt Monsieur d'Escorval's expedient; you would pretend that you had broken some limb. Only, as you are a clever fellow, it would be your *arm* that you would sacrifice. It would be less inconvenient; and you would not be condemned to seclusion for several months."

"So, Monsieur Tabaret, you are convinced that Monsieur d'Escorval knows who May really is."

Father Tirauclair turned so suddenly in his bed that his forgotten gout drew from him a terrible groan.

"Can you doubt it?" he exclaimed. "Can you possibly doubt it? What proofs do you ask, then? What connection do you see between the fall of the judge and the prisoner's attempt at suicide?

"I was not there, as you were; I know the story only as you have told it to me. I could not see it with my own eyes; but this is as I understand it—listen:

"Monsieur d'Escorval, his task at the Widow Chupin's house completed, comes to the prison to examine the assassin. The two men recognize each other. Had they been alone, mutual explanations might have ensued, and affairs taken quite a different turn.

"But they were not alone; a third party was present—Monsieur d'Escorval's clerk. So they could say nothing. The judge, in a troubled voice, asked a few commonplace questions; the prisoner, terribly agitated, replied as best he could.

"After leaving the cell, Monsieur d'Escorval said to himself: 'No, I cannot decide in the case of a man whom I hate!'

"He was terribly perplexed. When you tried to speak to him, as he was leaving the prison, he harshly told you to wait until to-morrow; and a quarter of an hour later he pretended to fall."

"Then you think that Monsieur d'Escorval and this so-called May are enemies?" inquired Lecoq.

"Do not the facts demonstrate that beyond a doubt?" asked Tabaret. "If they were friends, the judge might have done the same exactly; but the prisoner would not have attempted to strangle himself.

"But, thanks to you, his life was saved; for he owes his life to you. During the night, confined in a strait-jacket, he was powerless to injure himself. Ah! how he must have suffered that night! What agony!

"So in the morning, when he was conducted to the cabinet of the judge for examination, it was with a sort of frenzy that he dashed into the dreaded presence of his enemy.

"He expected to find Monsieur d'Escorval there, ready to triumph over his misfortunes; and he intended to say:

"'Yes, it is I. There is a fatality in it. I have killed three men, and I am in your power. But, for the very reason that there is a mortal hatred between us, you owe it to yourself not to prolong my tortures! It would be infamous cowardice in you to do so!'

"But, instead of Monsieur d'Escorval, he sees Monsieur Segmuller. Then what happens?

"He is surprised, and his eye betrays the astonishment he feels when he realizes the generosity of his enemy, whom he had believed implacable.

"Then a smile mounts to his lips—a smile of hope, for he thinks, since Monsieur d'Escorval has not betrayed his secret, that he may be able to preserve it, and

that he may, perhaps, emerge from this shadow of shame and of crime with his name and his honor still untarnished."

And with a sudden change of tone, and an ironical gesture, Papa Tabaret added:

"And that—is my explanation."

Old Father Absinthe had risen, frantic with delight.

"*Cristi!*" he exclaimed; "that is it! that is it!"

Lecoq's approbation was none the less evident, because it was mute.

He could appreciate this rapid and wonderful work of induction far better than his companion.

For a moment or two Papa Tabaret reclined upon his pillows enjoying the sweets of admiration, then he continued:

"Do you desire further proofs, my boy? Recollect the perseverance Monsieur d'Escorval displayed in sending Monsieur Segmuller for information. I admit that a man may have a passion for his profession; but not to such an extent as this. At that time you believed that his leg was broken. How is it that you felt no surprise that a judge, lying upon the rack, with his bones in fragments, should take so much interest in a miserable murderer? I have no broken bones, I have only the gout; but I know very well that when I am suffering half the world might be judging the other half, and the idea of sending Mariette for information would never occur to me. Ah! a moment's reflection would have enabled you to understand the reason of his solicitude, and would probably have given you the key to the whole mystery."

Lecoq, who was such a brilliant casuist in the Widow Chupin's hovel, who was so full of confidence in himself, and so earnest in expounding his theories

to simple Father Absinthe—Lecoq hung his head abashed and did not utter a word.

But he felt neither anger nor impatience.

He had come to ask advice, and strange to say, he thought it quite right that it should be given him.

He had made mistakes, and when they were pointed out to him, he did not become angry—another marvel! —and he did not try to prove that he had been right when he had been wrong.

Meanwhile M. Tabaret had poured out a great glass of *tisane*, and drained it. He now resumed:

"I need not remind you of the mistake you made in not obliging Toinon Chupin to tell you all she knew about this affair while she was in your power. 'A bird in the hand'—you know the proverb."

"Be assured, Monsieur Tabaret, that this mistake has cost me enough to make me realize the danger of ever allowing the zeal of a well-disposed witness to cool."

"We will say no more about that, then. But I must tell you that three or four times, at least, it has been in your power to clear up this mystery."

He paused, awaiting some protestation from his disciple. None came.

"If he says this," thought the young detective, "it must indeed be so."

This discretion made a great impression on Papa Tabaret, and increased the esteem he had conceived for Lecoq.

"The first time that you were lacking in discretion was when you were trying to discover the owner of the diamond ear-ring found in the Poivrière."

"I made every effort to discover the last owner."

"You tried very hard, I do not deny that; but as for

making every effort—that is saying too much. For example, when you heard that the Baroness de Watchau was dead, and that all her property had been sold, what did you do?"

"You know; I went immediately to the person who had charge of the sale."

"Very well! and afterward?"

"I examined the catalogue; and as, among the jewels mentioned there, I could find none that answered the description of these magnificent diamonds, I knew that the clew was lost entirely."

"There is precisely where you are mistaken!" exclaimed Papa Tirauclair, exultantly. "If a jewel of such great value is not mentioned in the catalogue of the sale the Baroness de Watchau could not have possessed it at the time of her death. And if she no longer possessed it she must have given it away, or sold it. And to whom? To one of her friends, very probably.

"For this reason, had I been in your place, I should have inquired the names of her intimate friends, which would have been a very easy task; and then, I should have tried to win the favor of all the *femmes de chambre* of these lady friends. This would have been only a pastime for a good-looking young fellow like you.

"Then," he continued, "I would have shown this ear-ring to each maid in succession until I found one who said: 'This diamond belongs to my mistress,' or one who was seized with a nervous trembling."

"And to think that this idea did not once occur to me!"

"Wait, wait. I am coming to the second mistake you made. What did you do when you obtained possession of the trunk which May pretended was his? You played directly into this cunning adversary's hand.

How could you fail to see that this trunk was only an accessory to the comedy, that it could only have been deposited with Madame Milner by the accomplice, and that all its contents must have been purchased for the occasion."

"I knew this, of course, but even under these circumstances, what could I do?"

"What could you do, my boy? Well, I am only a poor old man, but *I* would have interviewed every clothier in Paris; and at last some one of them would have exclaimed: 'Those articles! Why, I sold them to an individual like this or that—who purchased them for one of his friends, whose measure he brought with him.'"

Angry with himself, Lecoq struck his clinched hand violently upon the table by his side.

"*Sacré bleu!*" he exclaimed, "that method was infallible and as simple as the day. Ah! never while I live shall I forgive myself for my stupidity!"

"Gently, gently!" interrupted the sick man; "you are going too far, my dear boy. Stupidity is not the proper word at all; you should say carelessness, thoughtlessness. You are young—what else could one expect? What is far less inexcusable is the manner in which you conducted the chase, after the prisoner was allowed to escape."

"Alas!" murmured the young man, now completely discouraged; "did I blunder in that?"

"Terribly, my son; and here is where I really blame you. What diabolical influence induced you to follow this May, step by step, like a common policeman?"

This time Lecoq was stupefied.

"Ought I to have allowed him to escape me?" he inquired.

"No; but if I had been by your side when, beneath the gallery of the Odéon, you so clearly divined the prisoner's intentions, I should have said to you: 'This fellow, friend Lecoq, will hasten to the house of Madame Milner to inform her of his escape. Let us run after him.' And when he had left the Hôtel de Mariembourg, I should have added: 'Now, let him go where he chooses; but attach yourself to Madame Milner; do not lose sight of her; cling to her as closely as her own shadow, for she will conduct you to the accomplice—that is to say—to the solution of the mystery."

"That is the truth; I see it now."

"But instead of that, what did you do? You ran to the hotel, you terrified the boy! When a fisherman has hold of the seine, and is ready to draw in the fish, he does not beat the drum to frighten them away!"

Papa Tabaret thus reviewed the entire course of instruction, remodelling it in accordance with his method of induction.

Lecoq had, at first, had a magnificent inspiration. In his first investigations he had displayed remarkable talent; and yet he had not succeeded. Why? Simply because he had neglected the axiom with which he started: "Always distrust what seems probable!"

But the young man listened with divided attention. A thousand projects were darting through his brain. Soon he could restrain himself no longer.

"You have saved me from despair, Monsieur," he interrupted. "I thought all was lost; but I see that my blunders can be repaired. What I neglected to do, I can do now; there is still time. Have I not the diamond ear-ring as well as divers effects of the prisoner

still in my possession? Madame Milner still owns the Hôtel de Mariembourg, and I am going to watch it."

"And with what object, my boy?"

"For what object? Why, to find my prisoner, to be sure!"

Had he been less engrossed in his idea, Lecoq would have detected a slight smile in Tirauclair's thick lips.

"Ah, my son! is it possible that you do not suspect the real name of this pretended buffoon?"

Lecoq trembled and turned away his face. He did not wish Tabaret to see his eyes.

"No," he replied, "I do not suspect——"

"You are uttering a falsehood!" interrupted the sick man. "You know as well as I do, that May resides on the Rue de Grenelle-Saint-Germain, and that he is known as Monsieur le Duc de Sairmeuse.'"

On hearing these words, Father Absinthe laughed heartily.

"Ah! that is a good joke!" he exclaimed. "Ah, ha!"

Such was not Lecoq's opinion, however.

"Well, yes, Monsieur Tabaret," said he, "this idea did occur to me; but I drove it away."

"And why, if you please?"

"Because—because——"

"Because you would not believe the logical sequence of your premises; but I am consistent, and I say: "It seems impossible that the assassin in the cabin of the Widow Chupin should be the Duc de Sairmeuse.' Hence, the murderer in the Chupin cabin, May, the pretended buffoon, is the Duc de Sairmeuse!"

CHAPTER XLIII

How this idea had entered Papa Tabaret's head, Lecoq could not comprehend.

A vague suspicion had, it is true, flitted through his own mind; but it was at a moment when his despair at seeing his prisoner elude his grasp, as well as certain words uttered by Couturier, would furnish an excuse for almost any supposition.

But Father Tirauclair calmly—in cold blood, so to speak—announced as an undeniable fact a suspicion which he, Lecoq, had not dared to entertain, even for an instant, in his wildest excitement.

The sick man could not fail to notice the amazement of his visitor.

"You look as if you had suddenly fallen from the clouds," said he. "Do you suppose that I spoke at random like a parrot?"

"No, certainly not, Monsieur; but——"

"Hush! You are surprised because you know nothing of contemporaneous history. If you do not wish to remain all your life as a common detective, like your friend Gevrol, you must inform yourself on this subject."

"I must confess that I do not see the connection."

M. Tabaret deigned no response. Turning to Father Absinthe, and addressing him in the most affable tones, he said:

"Do me the favor, my old friend, to go to my library and bring me two large volumes entitled: 'General Biography of the Men of the Present Age.' They are in the book-case on the right."

Father Absinthe hastened to obey; and as soon as he was in possession of the books, M. Tabaret began turning the pages with an eager hand, like a person seeking some word in a dictionary.

"Esbayron," he muttered, "Escars, Escayrac, Escher, Escodica—at last we have it—Escorval! Listen attentively, my boy, and you will be enlightened."

This injunction was entirely unnecessary. Never had the young detective's faculties been more keenly on the alert.

It was in an emphatic voice that the sick man read:

"'Escorval (Louis-Guillaume, Baron d').—Diplomatist and politician, born in Montaignac, December 3rd, 1769, of an old family of lawyers. He was completing his studies in Paris on the breaking out of the Revolution. He embraced the cause with all the ardor of youth. But, soon disapproving the excesses committed in the name of Liberty, he sided with the Reactionists, counselled, perhaps, by Roederer, who was one of his relatives.

"'Commended to the favor of the first consul by Monsieur de Talleyrand, he entered upon his diplomatic career with a mission to Switzerland; and during the existence of the empire he was intrusted with many very important negotiations.

"'Devoted body and soul to the Emperor, he found himself gravely compromised by the Second Restoration.

"'At the time of the disturbances in Montaignac, he was arrested on the double charge of high treason and conspiracy. He was tried by a military commission, and condemned to death.

"'The sentence was not executed, however. He owed his life to the noble devotion and heroic energy

of a priest, one of his friends, the Abbé Midon, *curé* of the little village of Sairmeuse.

"'The Baron d'Escorval had only one son, who entered upon the duties of magistrate at a very early age.'"

Lecoq was intensely disappointed.

"I understand," he remarked. "It is the biography of the father of our judge. Only I do not see that it teaches us anything."

An ironical smile curved Father Tirauclair's lips.

"It teaches us that Monsieur d'Escorval's father was condemned to death," he replied. "That is something, I assure you. A little patience, you will soon know all."

He had found a new leaf, and he continued his reading:

"'Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Victor de Tingry, Duc de).—A French general and politician, born at the Château de Sairmeuse, near Montaignac, January 17, 1758. The Sairmeuse family is one of the oldest and most illustrious in France. It must not be confounded with the ducal family De Sermeuse, whose name is written with an e.

"'Leaving France at the beginning of the Revolution, Anne de Sairmeuse distinguished himself by his brilliant exploits in the army of Condé. Some years later he offered his sword to Russia; and it is asserted by some of his biographers that he was fighting in the Russian ranks at the time of the disastrous retreat from Moscow.

"'Returning to France with the Bourbons, he became quite famous by reason of the intensity of his ultra-royalist opinions. It is certain that he had the good fortune to regain the possession of his immense

family estates; and the rank and dignities which he had gained in foreign lands were confirmed.

"'Appointed by the king to serve upon the military commission charged with bringing to justice and trying the conspirators of Montaignac, he displayed a severity and a zeal that resulted in the capture and conviction of all the parties implicated.'"

Lecoq sprang up with sparkling eyes.

"I see it clearly now," he exclaimed. "The father of the present Duc de Sairmeuse tried to have the father of the present Monsieur d'Escorval beheaded."

M. Tabaret was the picture of complacency.

"You see the assistance history gives," said he. "But I have not finished, my boy; the present Duc de Sairmeuse also has his article, that will be of interest to us. So listen:

"'Sairmeuse (Anne-Marie-Martial).—Son of the preceding, was born in London in 1791, received his early education in England, and completed it at the Court of Austria, which he has since visited on several confidential missions.

"'Heir of the opinions, the prejudices, and the animosities of his father, he placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at the time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most extreme measures. Obliged to retire from office on account of general animadversion, he left behind him ill-will and hatred, which will be extinguished only with his life.'"

The sick man closed the book, and with assumed modesty, he asked:

"Ah, well! What do you think of my little method of induction?"

But Lecoq was too much engrossed with his own thoughts to respond.

"I think," he remarked, "if the Duc de Sairmeuse had disappeared for two months, the period of May's imprisonment, all Paris would have known it, and so——"

"You are dreaming!" interrupted Father Tabaret. "With his wife and his *valet de chambre* for accomplices, the duke could absent himself for a year if he wished, and all his servants would believe him in the hotel."

"I admit that," said Lecoq, at last; "but unfortunately, there is one circumstance which overturns this theory we have built up so laboriously."

"And what is that, if you please?"

"If the man who took part in the broil at the Poivrière had been the Duc de Sairmeuse, he would have disclosed his name; he would have declared that, having been attacked, he had only defended himself; and his name alone would have opened the prison doors for him. Instead of that, what did the prisoner do? He attempted to kill himself. Would a *grand seigneur*, like the Duc de Sairmeuse, to whom life must be a perpetual enchantment, have thought of committing suicide?"

A mocking whistle from Father Tabaret interrupted the speaker.

"You seem to have forgotten the last sentence in the paragraph: 'Monsieur Sairmeuse leaves behind him ill-will and hatred.' Do you know the price he might have been compelled to pay for his liberty? No; no more do I. To explain his presence at the

Poivrière, and the presence of a woman, who was, perhaps, his wife, who knows what disgraceful secrets he would be obliged to betray? Between shame and suicide, he chose suicide. He wished to save his name and his honor intact."

Father Tirauclair spoke with such vehemence that even old Father Absinthe was deeply impressed; although, to tell the truth, he had understood but little of the conversation.

He was now delighted and confident.

As for Lecoq, he rose, very pale, his lips trembling a little—like a man who had just taken an invincible determination.

"You will excuse my hypocrisy, Father Tabaret," he said, in an agitated voice. "I had thought of all this, but I distrusted myself. I wished to hear you say it."

Then with an imperious gesture, he added:

"Now, I know what I have to do."

Father Tabaret lifted his hands toward heaven with every sign of intense dismay.

"Unhappy man!" he exclaimed; "do you think of going to arrest the Duc de Sairmeuse? Poor Lecoq! Free, this man is almost omnipotent, and you, an infinitesimal agent of police, will be broken like glass. Take care, my boy; do not attack the duke. I would not be responsible, even for your life."

The young detective shook his head.

"Oh, I do not deceive myself," said he. "I know that the duke is far beyond my reach. But he will be in my power again on the day I learn his secret. I do not fear danger; but I know, if I would succeed, I must conceal myself—I will conceal myself then. Yes, I

will remain in shadow until the day when I can remove the veil from this mystery; then I will appear in my true character. And if May is really the Duc de Sairmeuse I shall have my revenge."

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